

8x8

The Channel Choice Guide for Improving Team Communication



Why we created this guide

We created this Channel Choice Guide because good-hearted people are suffering from communication channel choice confusion, channel overwhelm, and channel creep at work. We can't cope with the number of options we have when we want to ask a colleague a simple question, and we're burdened with the pressure to answer quickly when people contact us. Do our always-on communication channels mean we're always obliged to respond? Even on Saturday night? What should we do when a colleague overuses a channel or ignores a channel? What should we do when our boss does this?

This Channel Choice Guide will help calm the communication storm by suggesting guidelines for responding and problem-solving steps when things go wrong. You'll learn how quickly you must respond to an email and what to do when it's clear that that quick text question should really be handled in an online meeting. This Guide will cover the following communication channels: telephone calls, emails, texts, team messaging, and online meetings. This Guide won't cover communication channels that are scheduled (such as email blasts), have official subscribers (such as internal newsletters), get a lot of graphic design attention, or are reviewed by editors.

Which channel should you choose?

Your fingers are on your laptop keyboard, you're wearing a headset, and the conference room is available. With so many communication options, which channel should you choose?





Email

Email is best for...

- Detailed communications where you may want to offer options for discussion, explain a topic, or incorporate hyperlinks.
- Communications that are likely to be forwarded or shared.
- Topics that require a bit of time to respond to. Email's not a "right away" channel, so it gives the recipient a bit of time to think.
- Documenting a plan or decision.

Avoid using email when...

- You're angry. Calm down before you write or send that email.
- You have to overcome the reader's objections. Email is not very effective at overcoming a "no." It's better to handle that task in a meeting or over the phone.
- The topic of your email's going to raise more questions than it answers. If your topic raises lots of questions, choose a phone call or a meeting instead. In the end, it'll be more efficient.

Don't be THAT person who...

- Puts the main point of the email at the end or never gets to the point at all.
- Writes a lame subject line, such as "Question."
- Is too busy to spell check.
- Puts no effort into writing in a friendly, rapport-building style.

Telephone

Telephone is best for...

- Open-ended brainstorming
- Discussing sensitive topics or providing feedback on performance
- Building a relationship
- Apologizing
- Preventing misunderstandings

Avoid using telephone when...

- The other person will need a write-up of the topics being discussed.
- You're following up with an unresponsive person. You may phone that person eventually, but your first or second follow-up should probably be an email to give the person a bit of space.

Don't be THAT person who...

- Hates the phone so much that you simply won't use it.
- Enjoys talking on the phone so much that your work conversations always drift to the personal and take too long.
- Launches into a long phone conversation without asking whether the person you've phoned has time.





Text

Text is best for...

- Asking quick questions, stated concisely.
- Keeping in touch about logistics during an event.
- Attaching images or videos, which display well and easily on a mobile device.
- Communicating when wi-fi is dicey.

Avoid using text when...

- You're attaching a PDF or spreadsheet. Use email instead.
- You have a lot to say. Even one paragraph reads like a tome in text. Your message is controversial or sensitive. Texts are too short and too integrated with all the other apps on the person's mobile phone to carry a sensitive message.

Don't be THAT person who...

- Texts at every hour of the day and night.
- Uses more emojis than words. That's not professional.
- Texts people at work who you don't know very well or who aren't expecting your texts. If people are always texting you back "Who is this?" you should take the hint that you're crossing the line.



Online meeting

Meeting is best for...

- Coming to consensus. Email is poor at building agreement where none exists. If you and a colleague (or colleagues) don't agree on a course of action, choose a meeting.
- Conveying enthusiasm and building motivation. If you need to boost your team, schedule an online meeting.
- Integrating on-screen content into the discussion. If you need to share a slide deck or product demo before your team can work on it, an online meeting is the way to go.

Avoid an online meeting when...

- It will cause the discussion to expand, creep, and bloat.
- You really want each individual person's honest feedback, uninfluenced by the group.
- You're not prepared to define the purpose of the meeting. Because meetings are "time expensive," people really need to know why they're being asked to join.

Don't be THAT person who...

- Has logged in but isn't really participating in the meeting. Your colleagues shouldn't have to ask whether you've lost your connection, remind you to unmute yourself, or pointedly request your feedback each time a question is asked.
- Keeps talking over other people. Turn-taking can be difficult when you're connected virtually, but interrupting another person prevents the meeting from producing outcomes. If you find it difficult to wait while others speak, propose that participants respond round-robin style. That way, you'll know when your turn is coming and when others' turn to talk has ended.
- Introduces environmental noise or other distractions. It's possible to join an online meeting while boarding a plane or sitting on the sidelines at your kid's field hockey game, but it's not a good idea. Accept meeting invites only at times you can join without disturbing others.

Team messaging

Team messaging is best for...

- Checking on someone's availability before requesting help.
- Quick questions of the yes/no and "Where can I find...?" type.
- Inviting people to join an ongoing messaging conversation while you're in the middle of it.
- Mixing emojis into your writing (without going overboard)

Avoid using team messaging when...

- You need to share bad or sensitive news.
- You want people to take time to consider your request or proposal or gather information before responding. Team messaging encourages speed more than thoughtfulness.

Don't be THAT person who...

- Dribbles out the parts of a message one thought or half-sentence at a time. Prepare your full thought and send it in one concise message.
- Includes 10 people in a conversation that applies to only one or two.
- Ignores a "Do Not Disturb" message with a stream of "Are you there?" and "Quick question..." messages.



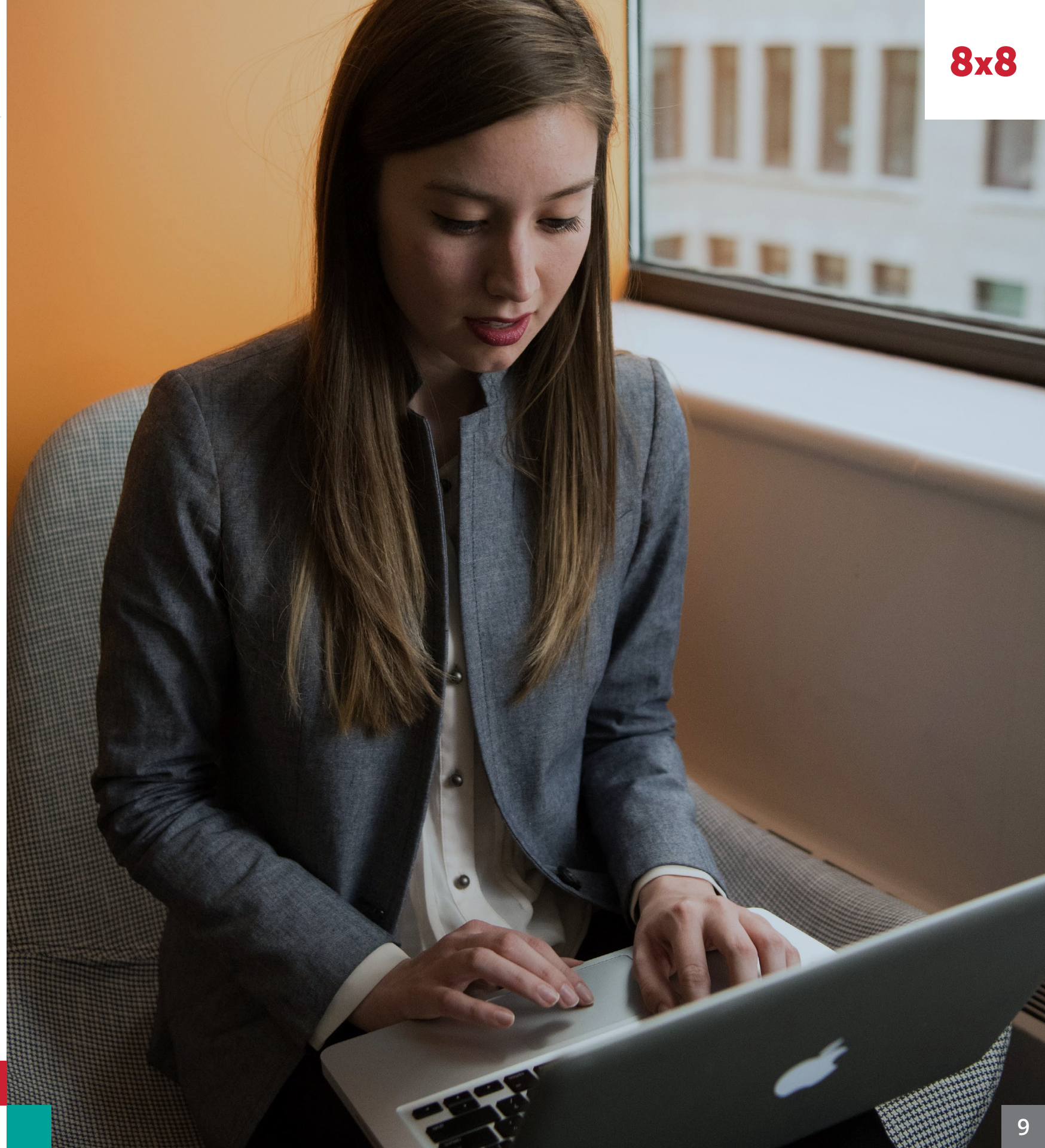
How quickly should you reply?

With so many channels to choose from—and with the line between work and home life so blurred it's basically disappeared—we're expected to reply to work communications very quickly. And our colleagues' and clients' expectations are increasing. People who used to ask, "When can you get back to me?" now ask, "I pinged you five minutes ago. Why haven't you gotten back to me?"

Of course, it's impossible to reply "right now" to every phone call, email, or team message. If you follow these guidelines—and if you write thoughtful, complete responses—the people you respond to should be satisfied.

How quickly you should reply in each channel

Email—within one business day. For some email topics, you should respond much quicker than one business day, but you must have a bedrock commitment to responding to every email within this timeframe. If you can't answer the writer's question or solve their problem within one business day, that's understandable. Within one business day, let the other person know you've received their email and are working on their request.



Text—within 30 minutes. Some of you are eye-rolling this advice because responding to a colleague or client's text within half an hour sounds incredibly slow. (You may receive 10 "Are you there?!" texts during that 30-minute wait.) While it's true that you're holding that always-on mobile device in your hand or carrying it in your pocket, you're not just staring at it, waiting to respond to a text. You're at a meeting, on the road, or at your laptop writing an important report. Let people who text you know you'll respond within 30 minutes, and send a thorough response when you do reply. Your answers will be worth the wait.

Team messaging—within 15 minutes. To respond to messages this quickly, you'll need two things: (1) colleagues who ask short questions via message and (2) the habit of letting the other

person know, "I got your message, it'll take me a bit of time to find the info you've asked for, and I'll be back in touch within [timeframe]."

Phone—within one business day. Handle those voicemails within one business day or less, much less. No one who's called you should ever wonder if you've listened to their message, if you're planning on taking action on their request, or if you "hate" the phone. Unless the caller explicitly requested a return phone call, you can respond to a voice mail by email or another channel, as long as you explain why you've switched. But you must respond to all phone messages within one day.



Three things you can do when the channel choice is causing communication problems

Your colleague sends you an email asking an open-ended question that requires brainstorming. If you reply to the email you'll have to write a novel, and you'll both be deprived of the brainstorming session. Another colleague messages you, promising he has one quick question. Then he sends a series of four separate messages, each with its own attachment. One email would've kept the discussion, and the files, all in one place.

Don't just give up and cope when the channel itself is causing communication to be inefficient, unproductive, unclear, or too long. Instead, try one of these three channel-correcting steps, and get the conversation back on track.





In the “wrong” channel, suggest the better channel and explain why it’s better.

Take the open-ended email example. You could write, “Thanks for your email. I think it’d be better to schedule a meeting to discuss this issue, so we can brainstorm a few options. I’m available on Tuesday at 11 am. Will that work for you?”

During a conversation in a live channel (phone call or video meeting), request a particular channel for a particular type of communication.

Let’s say you have a colleague who regularly emails you to ask simple yes or no questions. You’re usually out on the road on site visits, and you just don’t check your email that often, so email’s the wrong channel for these questions. Next time you’re in a meeting or on the phone with this person, you could say, “If you have a quick question, please text me instead of emailing me. I’m checking texts all day long, so I’ll be able

to get back to you quickly.” Why bother waiting until you’re on the phone or in a meeting to make this request? It’s easier to deliver with the friendly tone you intended if you deliver it in person.

Stop responding in the “wrong” channel, and move to the better one.

People do this during meetings all the time, and it works well. Instead of continuing a super-specific discussion of logistics that only applies to two of the five people at the meeting, someone will say, “I’ll follow up with you via email on these logistics questions.” You can also use this strategy to leave a written channel that’s not working. If you’re in a team message conversation that really should be an email, you could write, “Let’s move this to email where we can each express ourselves fully.” Then stop participating in the team message conversation.

Tips for handling problem communicators

You know it when a client or colleague's communication habits are causing problems in a project. She takes days to answer your emails. He's distracted during online meetings. It's embarrassing when clients see her meme-loaded team messages. He texts you on Saturday nights and expects an immediate reply.

Don't ignore problem communicators. That just causes resentment to fester. Ignoring the problem doesn't make it go away. Here are four tips for handling communication situations gone wrong:

Clearly express your own communication limits or rules.

If you don't answer work emails on the weekend, tell the problem communicator. Write, "Thanks for your email. I don't check or reply to work emails on the weekend, so I'll be back in touch on Monday."

Ask for your boss's help.

No, this isn't being a tattler. It's not easy to know what the consequences will be for correcting a customer's communication channel choice. For example, consider saying something like this to your boss, "John Smith of ABC Corp takes forever to answer my emails or he doesn't answer them at all. It's really causing problems on the project. I'm planning to schedule twice-weekly online meetings instead of using email with John. Do you support this plan?"



**Talk about it.**

Explain to the person how their communication habits are causing problems. Say, “Jason, I know you’re intending to be really thorough with your emails, but they’re so long I don’t think people are reading them. Could you try emailing more frequently but writing shorter messages?”

Take communication reboots in stride.

Don’t overreact to others’ communication problems or take them personally. No, she’s not leaving you voicemails to bug you. No, he’s not writing a vague subject line to “get back at you.” Instead, consider these communication problems to be run-of-the-mill workplace issues that can be addressed and improved.

Employers can reduce channel-choice stress by providing communication guidelines

The best employers offer internal Communication Guidelines, which make the company’s response time and channel choice expectations clear. Sure, there’s always the risk that this Communication Guidelines document will join the others that no one ever reads (“Business Attire Dress Code Policy” and “Damage to Company Property Policy,” anyone?). However, given how stressful employees are finding internal comms, there’s a better chance that people will refer to a Communication Guidelines document—or even obey it—when they need help.

What should your internal Communication Guidelines document cover?

1. Which topics are appropriate for which channels
2. Who should be included in a communication
3. When broad distribution (or mass communications) are OK and when they aren't
4. How quickly you're expected to respond in each channel
5. Whether you're expected to respond to any work communication outside of work hours or when you're on vacation
6. What to do when you're having communication problems. Who should you bring these problems to, and how should you discuss them?
7. How to let someone know their communication isn't professional
8. How casual or formal work communications are expected to be? Emojis, gifs, memes—yes or no?
9. Practical steps for solving typical communication problems: unresponsiveness, unprofessionalism, relentlessness
10. Tips for coping with communication overload



As always, when it comes to Guidelines, the perfect is the enemy of the good enough. If you wait until you have an uber-comprehensive table of contents, input from HR and your company's legal team, and sign-off from every manager, you'll be trapped in planning mode forever. When you publish the Guidelines, make it clear that you'll update them once or twice a year. Explain how people can give you input or request changes. Then get the Communication Guidelines out there, so they can help people caught in thorny situations.

Looking for inspiration? Here are a few well-known brands who've developed internal communication guidelines for their teams.

- **Bayer Corporation**, an employer of more than 20,000, has worked hard to cut down on communications clutter, particularly email overload. One of their metrics? number of emails not sent. In their eyes, less is more and clear, targeted messages are better. You can learn more about their philosophy and guidelines [in this article](#).
- **Basecamp**, a project management software company, is well-known for its unconventional approach to work communication. They encourage employees to take breaks from email, establish set blocks of time for meetings, and design their days in the most distraction-free way possible. They've also made their [employee handbook public](#), which includes specific guidelines on internal communication.
- **Google famously warned employees to "be nicer to each other or be fired."** In doing so, they released guidelines for the tone, language, and practices they expect their employees to use when using internal tools for communication.
- **Drift**, a conversational marketing platform, [describes their internal communication guidelines in this blog post](#). In addition to sharing channel-specific guidance, they also outline three guiding principles for communication—limit meetings, show your work, and autonomy.





Tips for better communication in each channel

Tips for writing better email

- 1. Write a clear subject line that indicates whether you need the recipient to do something.** So, if you're emailing a colleague to ask for an updated budget for a project, your subject line should be something like, "Request for updated budget for ABC project." If you can add a timeframe or deadline to the subject line, even better.
- 2. Put your main point at the beginning of your email,** before the explanation, justification or background. Sure, you can take a half-sentence to express a pleasantry, then get to the point right away. People who are reading emails on their mobiles (everyone) or using the preview pane need to see your main point first.
- 3. Add a little sugar.** No, you're not too busy to wish your colleague a good weekend or ask if they're feeling better after being out with the flu. These common courtesies may seem mundane, but they help sustain workplace relationships. In general, email's pretty poor at creating a connection, so you should do a little work to show you care.

Tips for writing business chat or instant messages

- 1. Take availability settings seriously.** This advice applies to your settings and to other people. If you set your status as "away," be away! Don't reply to others' messages, and don't message them if they're away.
- 2. Write short messages. Have short IM conversations.** If there's lots of back and forth, switch to the phone or an online meeting. In the end, a non-IM conversation—where you can see or hear each other—will be more productive.
- 3. Choose IM for low-emotion, generally positive topics.** Messaging is not the place to start a heated discussion on a sensitive topic, chastise someone, or even challenge someone. If you need to put a hot topic in writing, choose an email where you can draft and review your message.

Tips for better phone communication

- 1. Before calling, decide whether it'll be a short call or you'll let the call time extend, if necessary.** If you believe the call needs to be brief, let your colleague know: "I think this will only take 5 or 10 minutes." Keep your eye on the clock during the call and wrap it up within the expected time. But if the topic warrants an as-long-as-necessary call, keep track of the topics discussed and the decisions reached instead of the time.
- 2. Kick off the call by telling your colleague why you're calling and asking if they have time to talk.** This two-part opening is essential. Your colleague's answer to the second part will depend upon the scope and complexity of the first part.
- 3. Ask lots of questions.** You chose to speak with your colleague live, in real-time, so make your phone call a real conversation. Ask questions. Listen to the answers. Encourage the back and forth on the phone. Think of all the emails one phone call can prevent!

Tips for writing better texts

- 1. Use conventional spelling and grammar.** Your texts don't have to be "To Whom It May Concern" formal, but when you're texting for work, your writing should be correct. Go very light on the textese and use only the most familiar and widely-accepted, business-appropriate options, such as "thx."
- 2. Text during business hours...mostly.** We don't have the right to intrude on colleagues' personal time with business texts, so try to restrict your texting to business hours or just before/after the workday. If you do need to text someone outside of business hours, let them know you don't expect them to reply until the workday begins.
- 3. Choose text for short, simple topics.** Text is great if you need to ask a yes/no question or let someone know a meeting's been postponed. Don't use texts for topics that require negotiation or nuance.



Tips for better communication in online meetings

- 1. Start with some small talk.** To create a connection, budget a small amount of social convo time at the beginning of the meeting. Some teams do this in the form of an official ice-breaker, but you can kick off the meeting with any kind of casual question to let people settle in and relax.
- 2. Have all participants use their cameras, not just some.** A meeting where some are visible and others are in audio-only mode deprives everyone of the connections we make when we can see each other. Bad hair day and messy office aside, turn on the camera.
- 3. Get input from everyone, not just the outgoing people.** Quiet people may find it more difficult to speak up during online meetings, so you should solicit their input directly. You can do this by budgeting some of the meeting time to “go around the table” and get feedback from each individual participant or by directly asking the quiet people for their feedback.



Bringing it All Together

Setting clear communication expectations can take your team from good to great. When everyone knows and abides by the same set of rules, work gets done faster and morale improves. Following the guidelines in this eBook is a great place to start, and with the right technology, you can help your team connect and communicate more effectively, no matter where they work, all on one platform.

If your business collaborates internally, [8x8 X-Series](#) might be the right solution. We serve businesses of all sizes across all industry verticals—from dental practices, collection agencies, and law firms to larger enterprises, such as government organizations, healthcare providers, educational institutions, and insurance companies. [Learn more.](#)

About the Author

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Leslie is a get-to-the point writer and an experienced, versatile writing instructor. As E-WRITE owner since 1996, Leslie has been writing content and teaching customized writing courses for Fortune 500 companies, government agencies, and non-profit organizations. Leslie can help the most stubborn, inexperienced, or word-phobic employees at your organization improve their writing skills, so they can do their jobs better.

She’s got soup-to-nuts experience with online communication; she’s developed content strategy, written online style guides, trained employees, benchmarked content and email quality,

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Leslie is a LinkedIn Learning author of six writing courses on topics including writing for social media; live chat and text; plain language; and technical writing.

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