

A report from The Economist Intelligence Unit

Communication barriers in the modern workplace





Executive summary

It wasn't long ago that a work meeting meant gathering around a table to discuss an agenda. These days you may be using Slack, Hangouts or other digital collaboration platforms that blend messaging with video and allow real-time editing of documents. Even with these tools, communication at work can still break down, potentially endangering careers, creating stressful work environments and slowing growth.

A survey from The Economist Intelligence Unit and sponsored by Lucidchart reveals some of the perceived causes and effects of these

communication breakdowns. The survey, conducted from November 2017 to January 2018, included 403 senior executives, managers and junior staff at US companies divided equally and from companies with annual revenue of less than US\$10m, between US\$10m and US\$1bn and more than US\$1bn. The survey research provides insights about what employees see as the biggest barriers to workplace communication, the causes of the barriers and their impact on work life. Complete survey results are included at the end of this report.

Key highlights

- **Poor communication is having a tremendous impact on the workplace.** Unclear instructions from superiors, pointless meetings and other stressors can snowball into larger issues with widespread impacts on the business. Respondents say communication barriers are leading to a delay or failure to complete projects (44%), low morale (31%), missed performance goals (25%) and even lost sales (18%)—some worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.
- **The most frequently cited cause of communication barriers is fundamentally human: different communication styles.** In an age of constantly changing and real-time communication tools, this barrier is made more complex by generational and functional differences in communication preferences.
- **The use of instant messaging and social media at work reflects a gap between how generations use certain communication tools.** Nearly a third of millennials (31%) say they use instant messaging at work every day, compared with only 12% of baby boomers. Tomorrow's executives will find they have to adapt if they want to be effective today when working with older generations that prefer to pick up a phone. At the same time, older generations would be wise to embrace the new communication tools on which developing leaders will continue to rely.
- **There is a discrepancy between the communication tools that people find most effective and the ones they regularly use.** Visual-based tools, for example, are relatively underused compared with their effectiveness. Video conferencing, presentation decks, white boards and sketch pads are largely seen as somewhat or very effective at helping respondents share ideas and understand them well. However, email, which is the most commonly used method of workplace communication, is not considered very effective by the majority of respondents.
- **An employee's place in the pecking order affects the fallout they face from poor communication.** Middle managers tend to be affected the most by communication barriers. For example, nearly half of directors (49%) say their colleagues experience the consequences of poor communication either frequently or very frequently—more than C-level executives and non-manager employees. This fact though is not so surprising considering they are constantly conveying information back and forth between senior executives and junior employees, both of whom have different approaches to communication.

The impact of poor communication

The repercussions of poor communication in the workplace can be severe and widespread: 44% of respondents indicate that miscommunication has caused a delay or failure to complete projects. As for the direct impact on business, 18% say miscommunication has led to the loss of a sale, nearly a third (30%) of which were valued between US\$100,000 and US\$999,999.

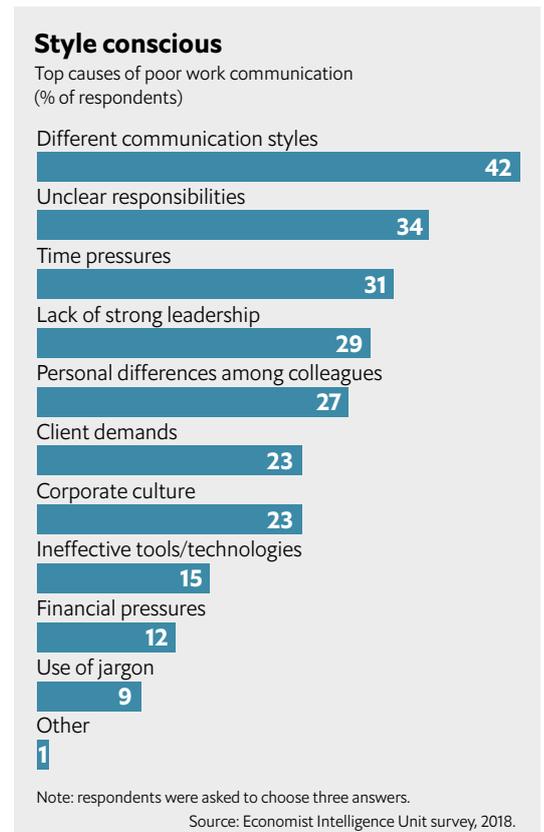
Communication breakdowns also contribute to



less tangible issues, such as stress (52%) and low morale (31%). Employees of all ages and seniority levels must consider a number of factors in order to improve workplace communication and, as a result, productivity, morale and the bottom line.

Causes of poor communication

Different communication styles (42%), unclear responsibilities (34%) and time pressures (31%) are the three most frequently cited causes of poor communication. These causes suggest that managers need to tailor their communication styles to those around them to be effective. Doing so would ensure team members operate with a clear understanding of what they need to accomplish and expectations of when goals should be met.



“We need to be more mindful in general about what format people use to get together and communicate,” says Susan Cain, author of *Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that can’t stop talking*. Ms Cain says we have nearly constant communication happening. However, because we aren’t always mindful about the mode of communication we use, people are often left unclear about responsibilities or unable to contribute meaningfully to the discussion.

Overcoming communication barriers will ultimately have to involve not only accommodating different personal styles, but also ensuring that management’s communications are effective and account for generational differences in how information is shared at work.

Different communication styles and ineffective use of communication tools are contributing to the lack of clarity about responsibilities that is evident in the research, and certainly adding to workplace stress levels. In fact, the survey shows that unclear instructions from a senior colleague or manager is the most frequently cited stressful situation at work.

A third of millennials (33%), who are defined as

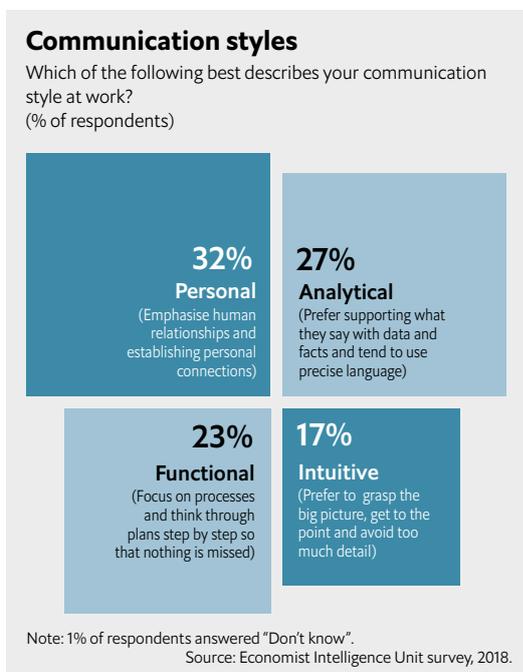
being born between 1981 and 1999, call themselves functional communicators. That is far more than members of Generation X (15%), born 1965-1980, or baby boomers (21%), born 1964 or earlier. Baby boomers and members of Generation X described themselves as personal communicators (34% and 39%, respectively) more often than millennials (23%).

Generation gaps

Different generations do agree on something. Sixty-five per cent of respondents say that face-to-face meetings are a very effective mode of communication—and this number does not vary significantly among generations. Yet only 22% say they have these meetings every day. “We are best at face-to-face communication in small groups in real time,” says Art Markman, professor of psychology and marketing at the University of Texas at Austin. “Yet globalisation and flexible work schedules are distributing people in time, narrowing the window when people’s availability overlaps and they could meet in person. I don’t see that going away,” he adds.

Indeed, only 28% of respondents say in the past year they have not worked remotely. This suggests modern-day employees will need to use a range of other modes of communication more effectively—including real-time collaboration tools such as video chat and instant messaging—and many already are.

Usage of social media and instant messaging at work is driving the biggest wedge in communication between millennials and older colleagues. Nearly a third of millennials (31%) and members of Generation X (30%) say they have used instant messaging every day in the past year to communicate with colleagues and clients. However, only 12% of baby boomers say the same. A third of boomers (34%) say they have not used instant messaging in the past year.



Modes of communication

How often have you used the following means to communicate with colleagues or clients?
(% of respondents)

		Every day	Most days	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't know
Email	Millennials	58%	28%	11%	2%	0%	1%
	Generation X	71%	22%	8%	0%	0%	0%
	Baby boomers	52%	34%	12%	3%	0%	0%
Instant messaging	Millennials	31%	22%	19%	14%	15%	0%
	Generation X	30%	21%	19%	12%	18%	0%
	Baby boomers	12%	15%	27%	11%	34%	0%
Phone	Millennials	29%	37%	30%	2%	3%	0%
	Generation X	33%	41%	24%	2%	1%	0%
	Baby boomers	18%	38%	39%	4%	2%	0%
Face-to-face meetings	Millennials	20%	44%	29%	5%	1%	2%
	Generation X	32%	33%	29%	5%	1%	0%
	Baby boomers	14%	37%	40%	5%	3%	1%
Social media	Millennials	13%	23%	17%	15%	33%	0%
	Generation X	9%	8%	29%	17%	37%	1%
	Baby boomers	6%	7%	18%	20%	47%	1%

70+ 60-69 50-59 40-49 30-39 20-29 10-19 0-10

Source: Economist Intelligence Unit survey, 2018.

Mr Markman says millennials who wish to rise to leadership positions need to master the ability to communicate clearly in person so that they can reach these older generations. “We have a generation who is not as practiced at engaging in real time with people,” he explains.

Future leaders must have the ability to communicate across styles and modes, reaching across generations. As functional communicators, millennials will probably continue to use various new tools as they ascend and grow older. The trick will be to tailor each one’s use to the different communication styles around them. Likewise, older generations should be willing to embrace new communication tools that developing leaders are using to connect and innovate.

Seeing is believing

Some interesting discrepancies exist between which modes of communication are seen as effective and which are frequently used. Email is unsurprisingly the most heavily used mode of communication, with 60% of respondents saying they use it every day. Yet only 40% say it is a very effective means of communication.

But what if heavily used modes of communication, such as email and phones, were used in tandem with other tools that are viewed as relatively more effective? For example, many respondents say visual-based tools are effective; they just don’t use them often. Although 55% say video conferencing is somewhat or very effective, only 7% use it daily. Similarly, 60% see presentation decks and 50% see white boards and sketch pads as somewhat or very effective, but only 9% in both cases use them daily. Rather than replacing communication tools, improving daily communication at work may be more about using effective technologies more often.

The corporate totem pole

Corporate roles can also contribute to poor communication at work. Directors and middle managers in particular tend to get caught in the middle of those conflicting communication preferences. As a result, they are affected by miscommunication most frequently: 49% of directors say the consequences of poor communication occur frequently or very frequently among their colleagues. That is substantially more than the 28% of C-suite executives who say the same.

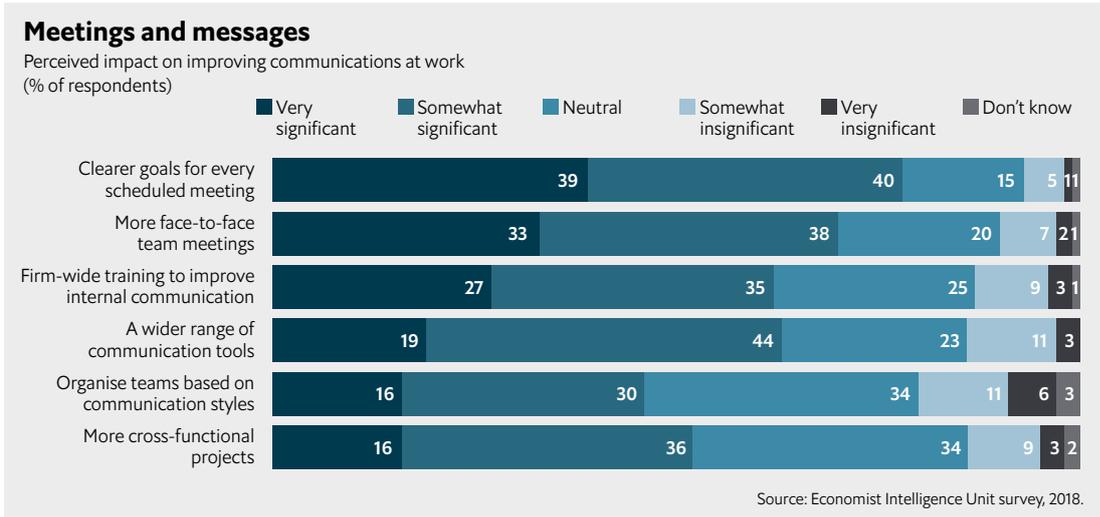
“Middle managers have the worst of all worlds,” Mr Markman says. “Communication is one of the most significant parts of their job because they’re dealing with the widest variety of people.”

Probably because of their location in the

hierarchy, directors tend to be prolific users of nearly every tool and mode of communication—much more so than other seniorities. Furthermore, a larger share of directors finds nearly every mode of communication more effective than their colleagues of different seniorities. They are the Swiss Army knife equivalent of corporate internal communication.

Ms Cain believes there are perks to this. “The great value of being stuck in the middle is you can easily empathise with those above and below you because you’re simultaneously in both roles,” she says. “You have tremendous insight into what everyone around you is feeling, you can project yourself into their shoes and you know what the pressures and stressors are for your boss.”

As individuals move up the corporate ladder, they need to not just have a broad understanding of different communication styles but also adapt their approach to their position in the organisation.



What to do about workplace miscommunication?

Work environments don't have to be full of miscommunication land mines, and businesses can take practical steps to improve communication. Meetings are a good place to start. The survey shows that 78% of respondents think having clearer goals for every scheduled meeting would have a significant impact on improving workplace

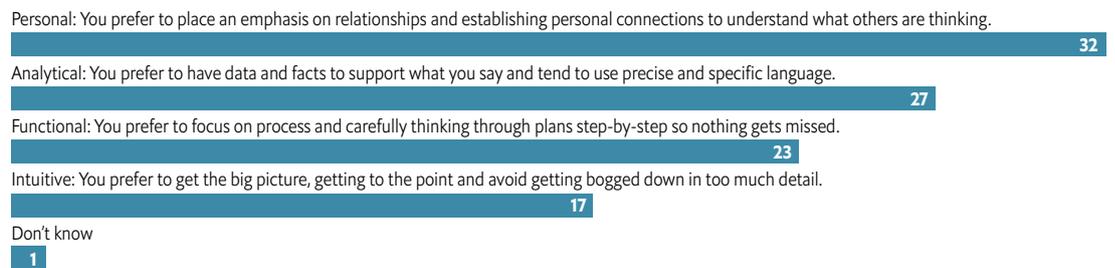
communication, including 39% who say the improvement would be very significant. Moreover, six out of ten respondents say firm-wide training (62%) and having a wider range of communication tools to use (63%) would significantly improve work communication. By improving in areas such as these, as well as being aware of communication differences and the best applications of various tools, the workforce can both communicate more effectively and keep pace with the inevitable continuous change in when and how we connect at work.

Survey results

Percentages may not add to 100% owing to rounding or the ability of respondents to choose multiple responses.

Which of the following best describes your communication style while at work? Select one.

(% of respondents)



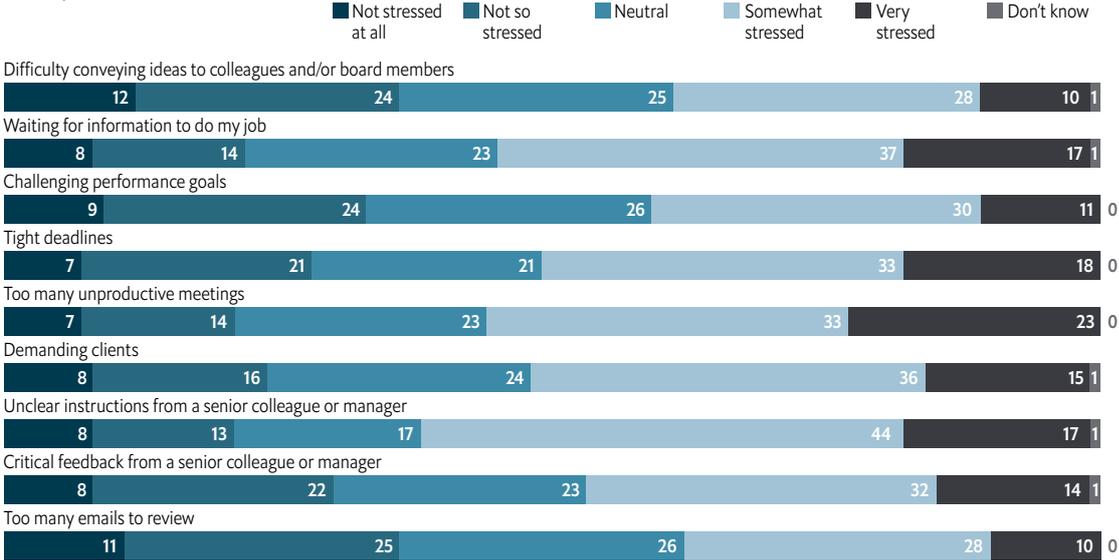
Which of the following best describes how you feel about working with people who have different communication styles from you? Select one.

(% of respondents)



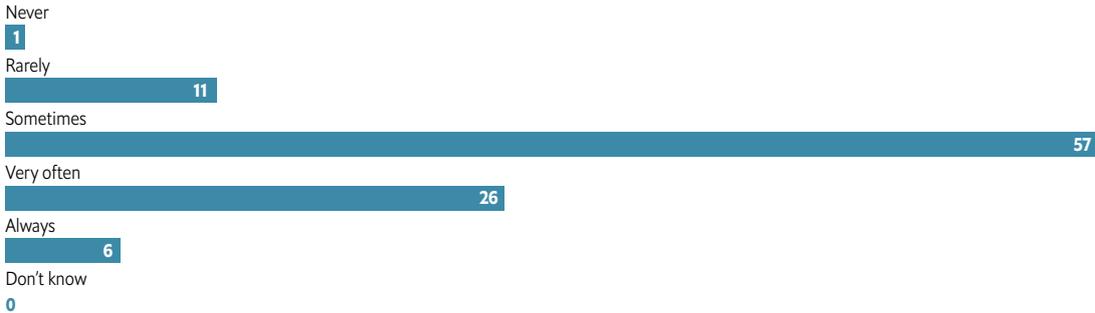
How stressful do the following situations make you feel at work? Select one in each row.

(% of respondents)



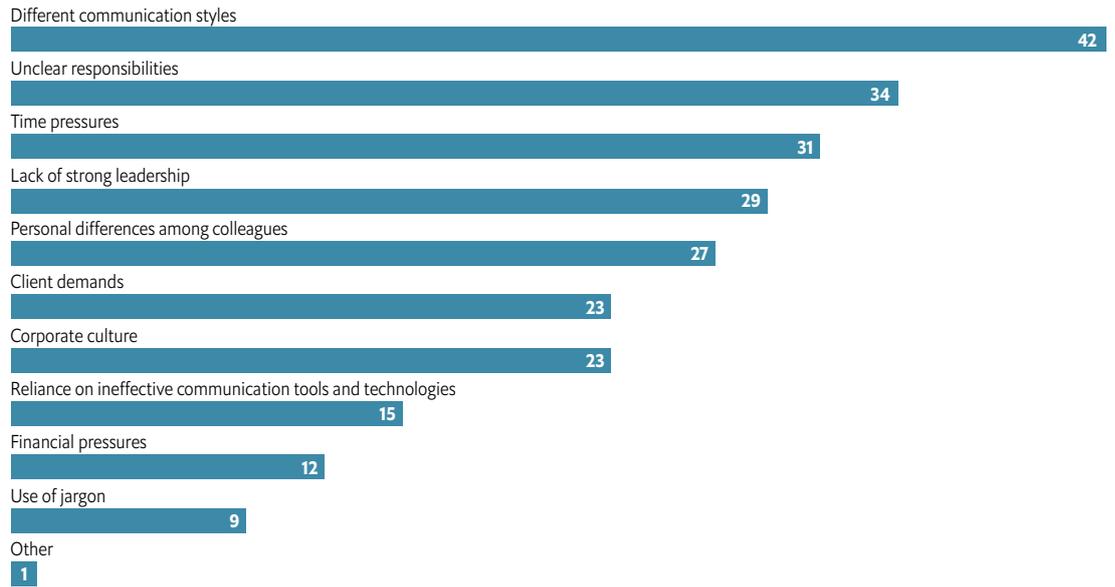
Thinking of your answers to the previous question, how often does miscommunication (or poor communication) contribute to the stress that you feel at work? Select one.

(% of respondents)



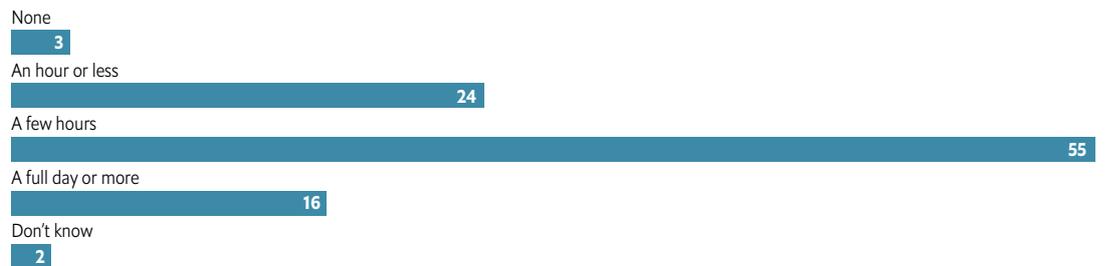
What are the top causes of poor communication or miscommunication at your workplace? Select up to three.

(% of respondents)



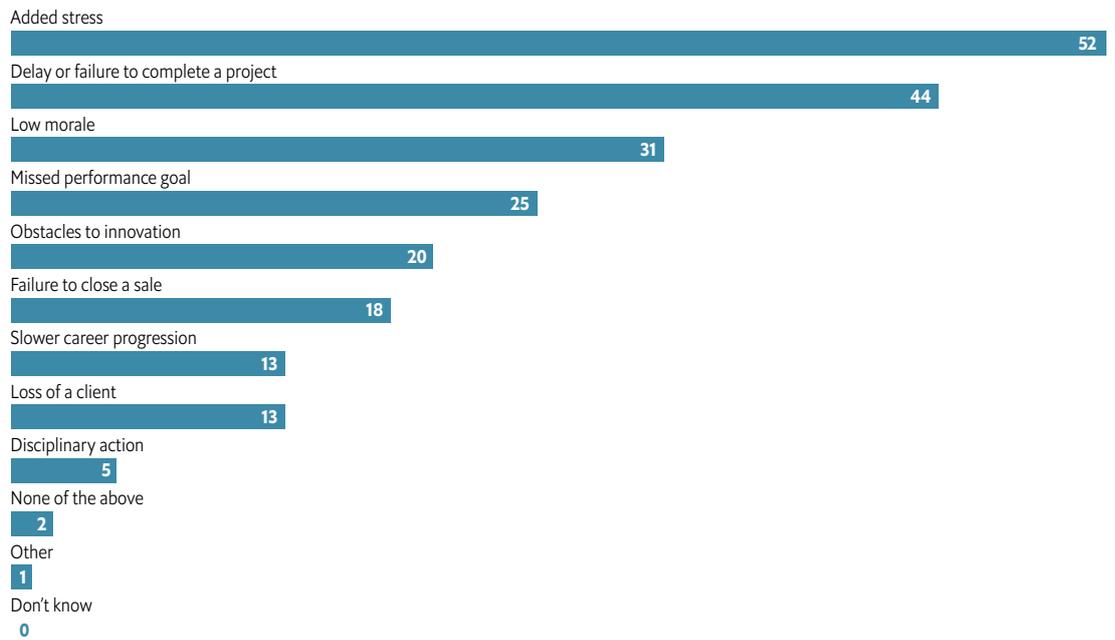
Thinking of the past month, approximately how much time each week on average did you spend on work caused by poor communication? Select one.

(% of respondents)



Thinking of the past year, what have been the most significant consequences of miscommunication (or poor communication) at your workplace? Select up to three.

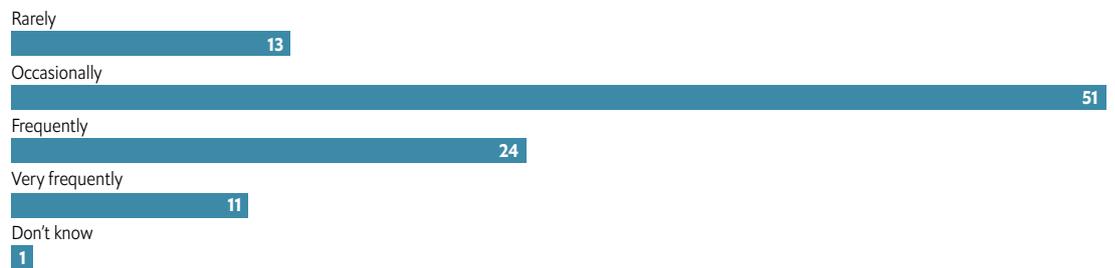
(% of respondents)



How often have the consequences that you described in the previous question occurred among your colleagues?

Select one.

(% of respondents)



In a previous question, you answered that a communication breakdown in the past year led to failure to close at least one sale. What was the approximate value of lost sales? Select one.

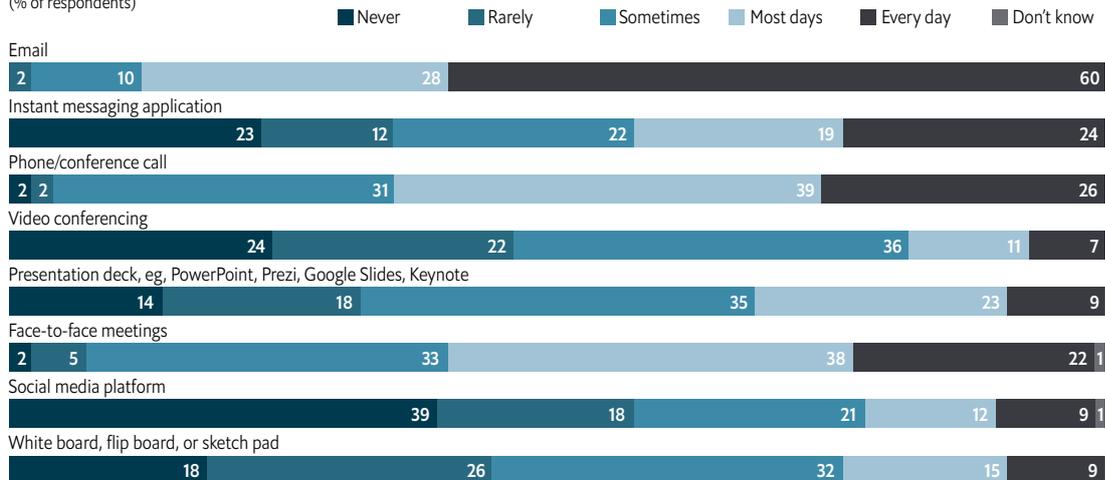
(% of respondents)



In the past year, how often have you used the following means of communication with colleagues or your firm's clients?

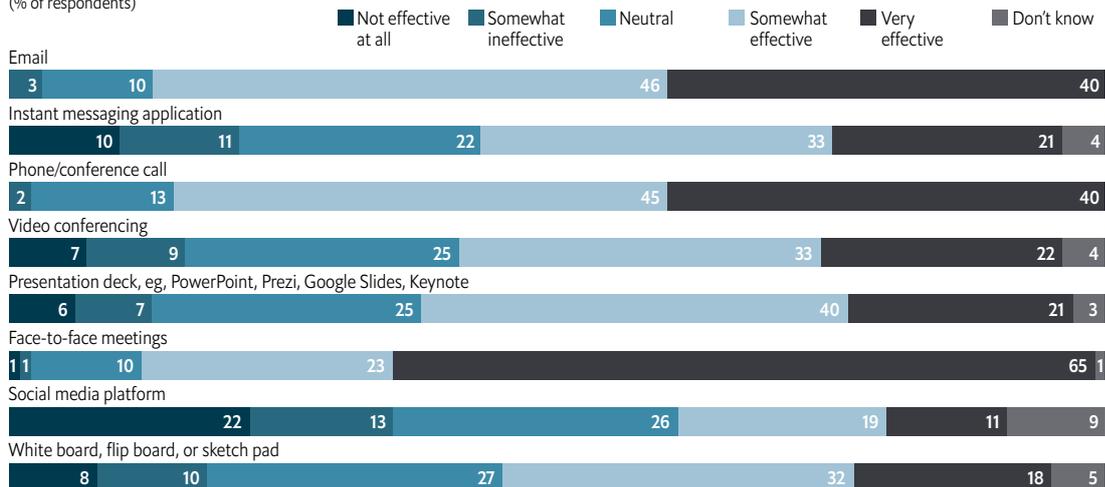
Select one in each row.

(% of respondents)



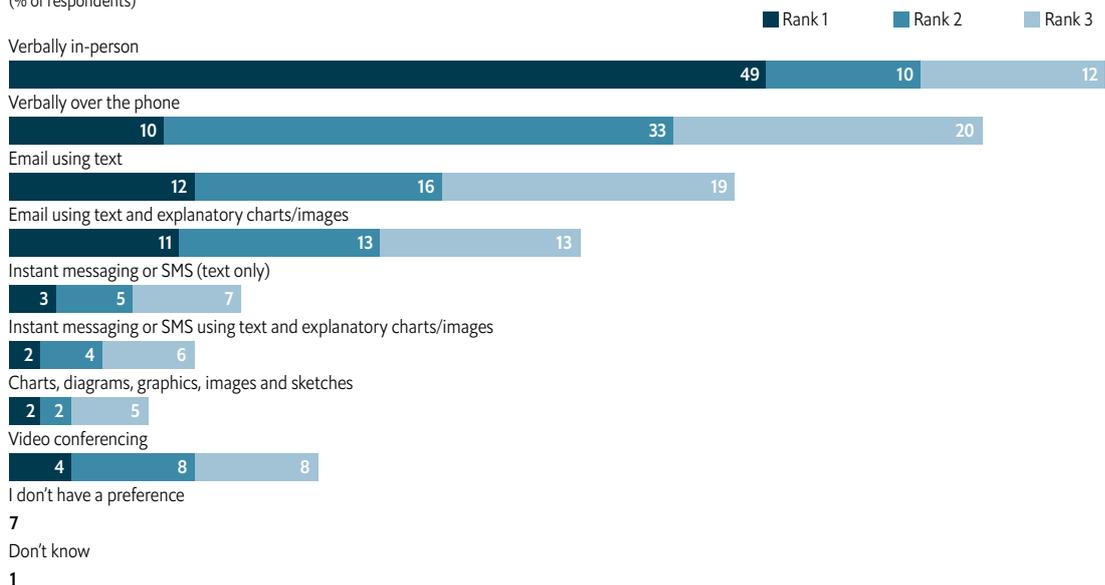
How effective are the following means of communication at helping you and your colleagues share information and understand it well? Select one in each row.

(% of respondents)



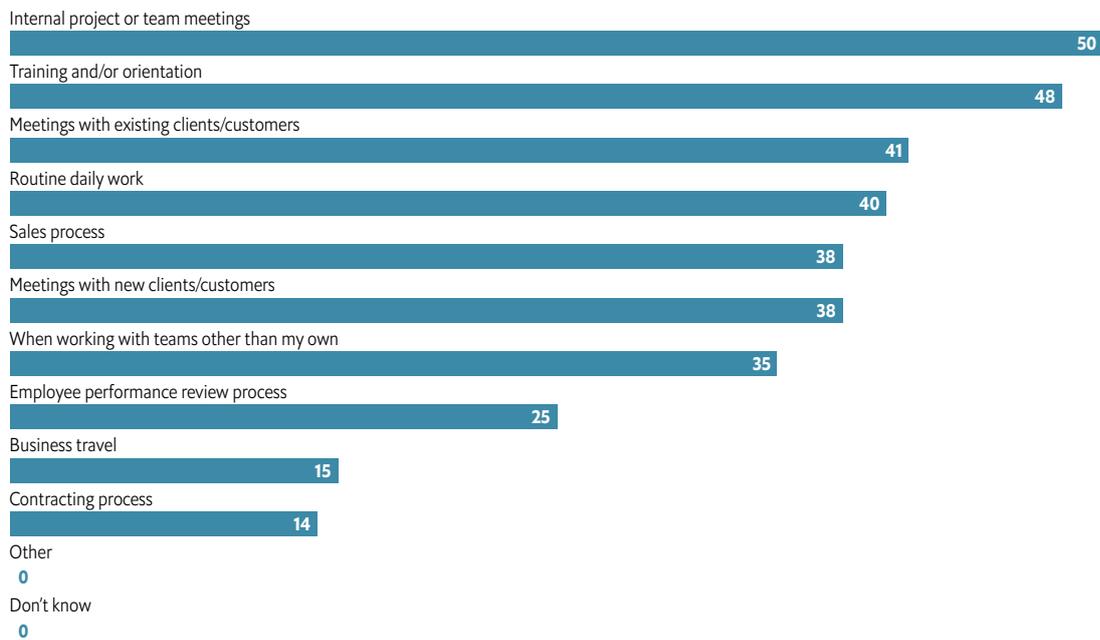
Which of the following are your preferred ways of communicating with either colleagues or customers? Rank the top three, where 1 is your most preferred means of communication.

(% of respondents)



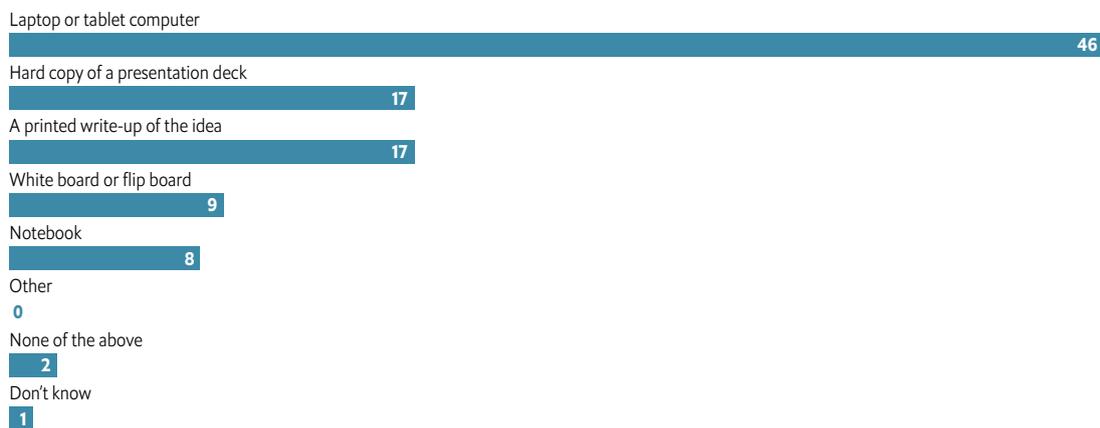
In the previous question, you answered that you prefer to include charts and images when you communicate with either colleagues or customers. In which of the following situations have you used them? Select all that apply.

(% of respondents)



When conveying a complex idea to a colleague or customer who is physically present, which of the following tools is the most important for you to have on hand? Select one.

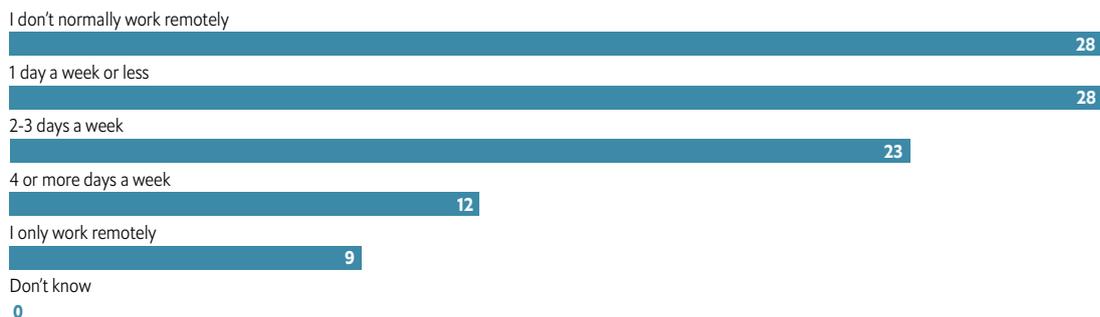
(% of respondents)



In the past year, on average, how often have you worked remotely (ie, telecommuting or working outside of the office)?

Select one.

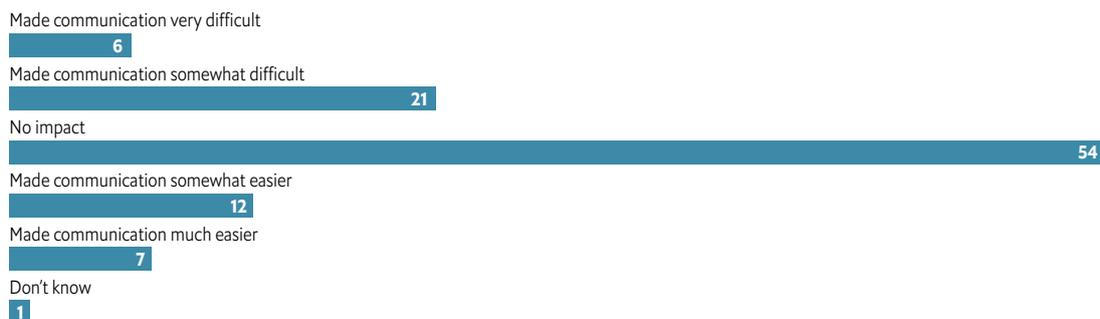
(% of respondents)



In the previous question, you answered that you have worked remotely in the past year. How has this affected your ability to communicate with colleagues and/or your firm's clients?

Select one.

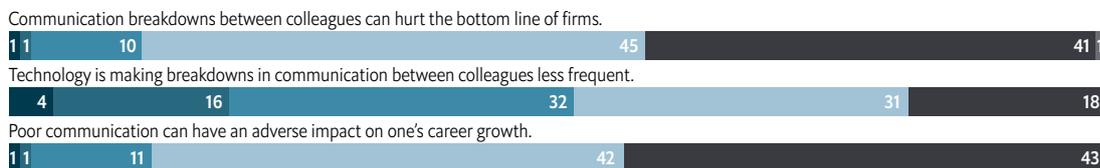
(% of respondents)



Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Select one per row.
(% of respondents)

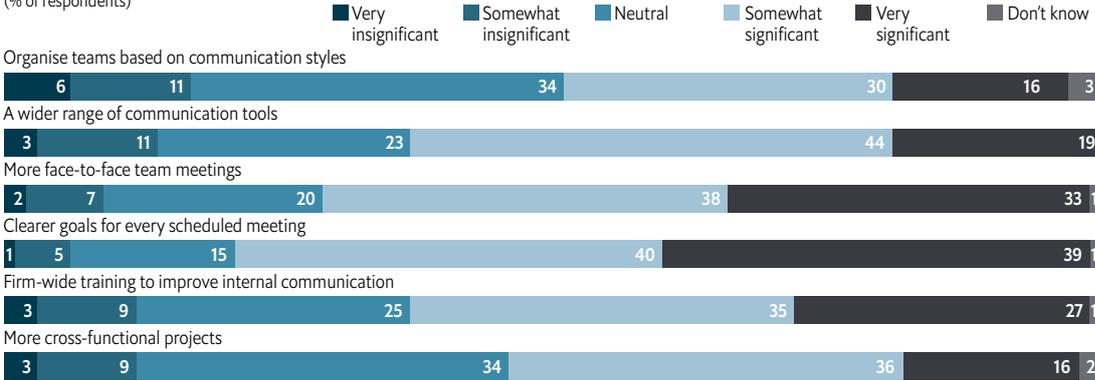
Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree Don't know



To what extent would the following have a significant impact on improving communication between your colleagues?

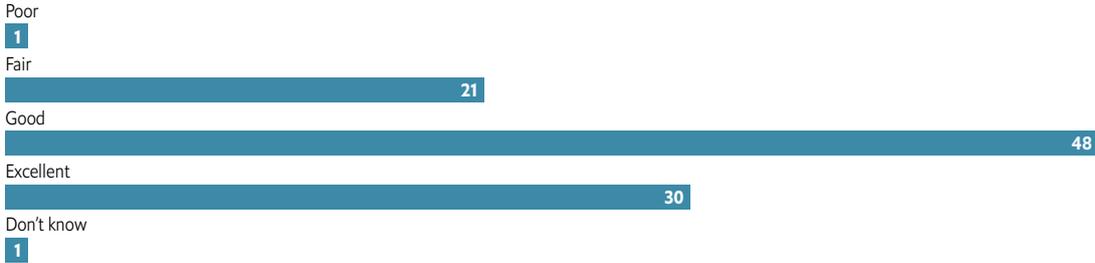
Select one in each row.

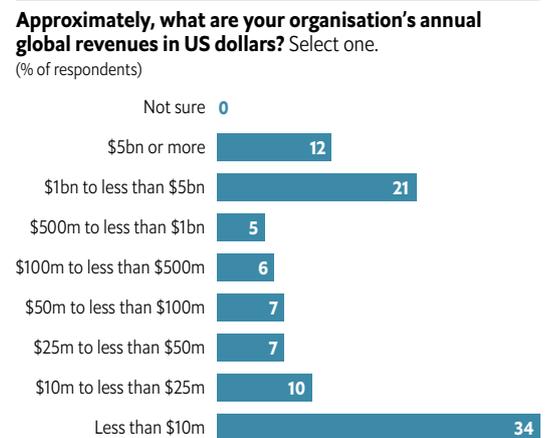
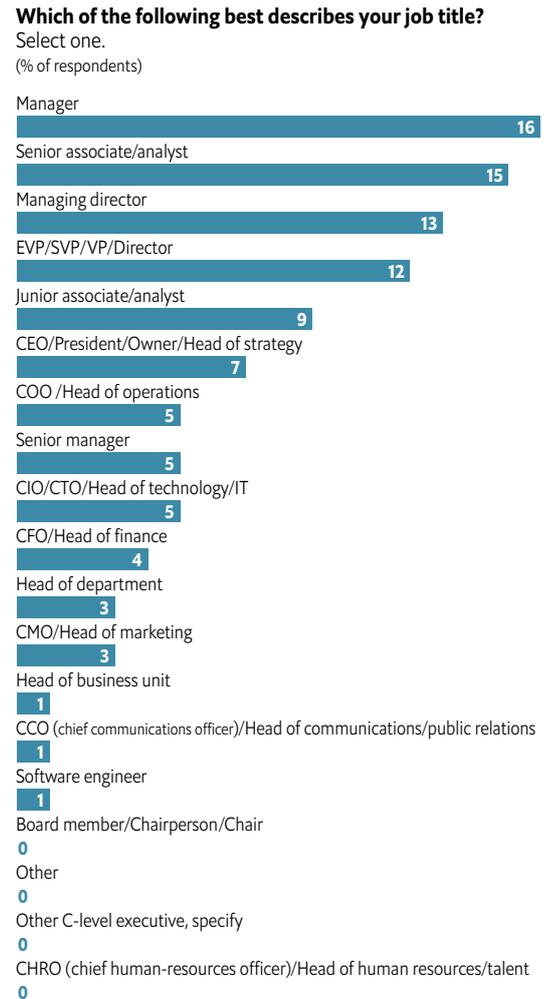
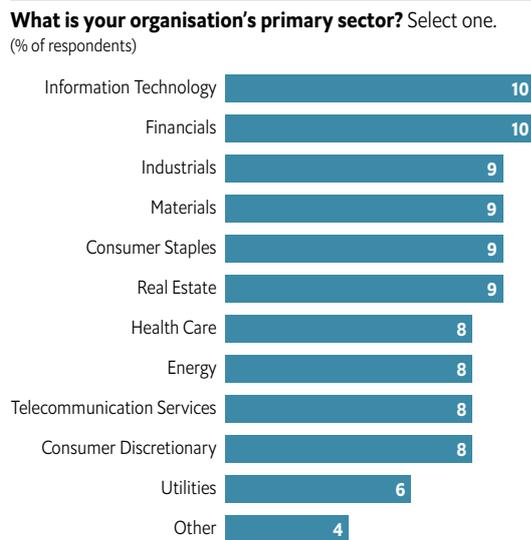
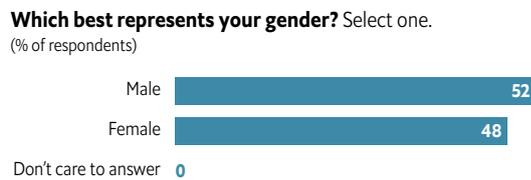
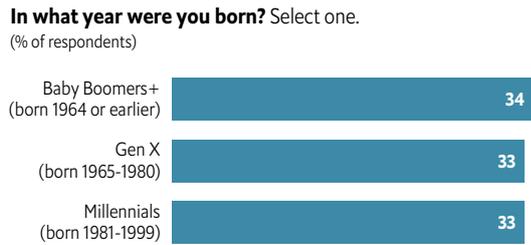
(% of respondents)



How would you describe your firm's growth prospects in 2018-2019? Select one.

(% of respondents)





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London

20 Cabot Square
London
E14 4QW
United Kingdom
Tel: (44.20) 7576 8000
Fax: (44.20) 7576 8476
E-mail: london@eiu.com

New York

750 Third Avenue
5th Floor
New York, NY 10017
United States
Tel: (1.212) 554 0600
Fax: (1.212) 586 0248
E-mail: newyork@eiu.com

Hong Kong

1301 Cityplaza Four
12 Taikoo Wan Road
Taikoo Shing
Hong Kong
Tel: (852) 2585 3888
Fax: (852) 2802 7638
E-mail: hongkong@eiu.com

Geneva

Boulevard des
Tranchées 16
1206 Geneva
Switzerland
Tel: (41) 22 566 2470
Fax: (41) 22 346 93 47
E-mail: geneva@eiu.com

Dubai

Office 1301a
Aurora Tower
Dubai Media City
Dubai
Tel: (971) 4 433 4202
Fax: (971) 4 438 0224
E-mail: dubai@eiu.com