***Discuss the role of communication technology in business relationship building, development and maintenance.***

**Introduction**

The way that we communicate today is evolving as advances in technology offer new channels that link us to a wider more varied audience. Today, advances in communication technologies are creating new opportunities to build business relationships irrespective of geographical space and not defined by time constraints (Tucker, Meyer & Westerman, 1996; Schwom & Snyder, 2012).  Communication channels include collaborative exchanges either in a face-to-face, written, or voice format with the option of being synchronous or asynchronous. The communication technologies available today offer new opportunities to build, develop and maintain business relationships.

**A Strategy to Build Relationships**

Effective business relationship building requires a strategy to open lines of communication. It is important to develop and build relationships within business environments (Tucker, Meyer & Westerman, 1996). A good communication strategy cultivates the kind of environment that good relationships can be developed in (Clampitt, 2010). Clampitt (2010) developed a hierarchy of communication goals that exemplify the different aspects in a business relationship.  At the less involved level, business communication relationships begin with informing on issues.  These goals then increase in difficulty level to include training, relating, coordinating, inspiring and influencing, and educating. Each of these goals can be accomplished more effectively using the different communication technologies that are available today.

An essential part of the strategy is to ensure one stays current with communication technologies. It is common today to find business people and leaders threatened by new technology.  It is not necessary to use all the available communication channels today but successful relationships will try new methods and embrace technological challenges. For example, there is still a reliance on email to share information yet there are now many professionals opting for more suitable ways to collaborate. It is necessary to think about the implications of choices in the technologies that are made (McShane & Von Glinow, 2010; Schlenkrich & Upfold, 2009; Shwom & Snyder, 2012). Nunamaker, Reinig and Briggs (2009) recommend that it is best to embed collaborative technologies into everyday work so that all become comfortable in the new medium. It is further recommended that a good mix of channels be used so that communication within relationships can take advantage of the many options available and use the most appropriate for any given situation.

**Developing Networks Beyond Time and Place Constraints**

Due to the advance in communication technologies, business networks are expanding in both physical and virtual space. Collaborative technological tools allow an organization to be more flexible, agile and quick to seize opportunities and develop longer lasting networks (Clampitt, 2010; Dwyer, 2013). Networks are built over time and communication technologies today are providing easier ways for those networks to remain intact (Dwyer, 2013; Todeva, 2006). Today, strategic networks are cross-functional, cross-organizational (Dwyer, 2013; Tucker, Meyer & Westerman, 1996) and are not limited by physical time and space.

Communication is a skill that needs to be developed and this is especially true when relying more on virtual and asynchronous communication.  It is important to design activities to get people to get to know each other and to provide training and assistance in building a virtual social presence within networks (Dwyer, 2013; Nunamaker et al., 2009). Social presence in virtual teams is developed through the use of collaborative technologies (Schlenkrich & Upfold, 2009). Some software is better at showing virtual presence so it is important to choose wisely when selecting  the option to use (Nunamaker et al., 2009).  Specific training for chosen communication channels will assist all members of a network to take full advantage of the chosen channel and avoid mis-communicating (Clampitt, 2010; Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, Gulia, and Haythornthwaite,1996). Cultural and non-verbal cues are often not as visible in virtual formats so training is essential to ensure effectiveness.

Due to the expansive reach of social networks there is now a blurred line in defining business networks. Personal networks outside of the organization often provide opportunities to expand learning and knowledge creation (Dwyer, 2013; Tucker, Meyer & Westerman, 1996). Networking, using social media, provide a cost-free forum for sharing knowledge, ideas and opinions to much larger audiences (Dwyer, 2013; McShane & Von Glinow, 2010).  Platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook enable professional to build an identity as well as establishing a wide range of helpful and supportive contacts (Dwyer, 2013; Kietzmann, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Networks continue to grow and effort must be given to developing strong effective links that will last.

**Assess and Maintain Communication Technology Effectiveness**

It is important to inventory and assess channel effectiveness. We all can fall into habits easily but changes in technology are continually occurring so we need to stay abreast of these changes.  I regularly look at Jane Hart’s Top 100 Tools for Learning to gauge the relevance of technological communication tools that I am using (Hart, 2012) and to gain insight into new options available. To ensure continued effectiveness in communication, it is important to develop skills in communication technologies and to align these with senders, channels and receivers.  This should not be left to chance or fall prey to the latest fad or newest technology on the market. Clampitt (2010) developed a model for selecting appropriate communication technologies and assessing their effectiveness.  The goal is to align the four elements that include: the objectives of the sender, the attributes of the message, the attributes of the channel, and the characteristics of the receivers. The introduction of new technologies continues to occur making it a fluid situation that requires all of us to not become complacent but continually seek effective options.

**Conclusion**

Managers connect with employees and other business professionals through an array of channels. It is impossible to use all the available communication technologies that we have available today.  However, it is important to assess the benefits and implications of choices (Shwom & Snyder, 2012) and determine which channel best meets needs and goals. As new technologies increasingly come on the market it is good to challenge ones self to not fall into the trap of always using the same tools.  It is a good habit to continually expand our understanding and find effective communication tools to develop relationships and networks.  Shwom and Snyder (2012) encourage us to always be willing and able to adapt to new technologies as they arise. Tucker, Meyer and Westerman (1996) go further to remind us that an organization that builds successful networks and encourages collaborative communication creates a global strategic competitive strategy.

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