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## How & Why Technology Matters in Consulting & Coaching Interventions

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## **Chapter 14: *How & Why Technology Matters in Consulting & Coaching Interventions***

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Margaret Keys is watching a YouTube video of her client's latest presentation to help her prepare for her coaching call later this afternoon.

Celia Berk focuses on maintaining a "human touch" combined with shared platforms, email, and conference calls as she participates in an unprecedented global reorganization of the IT infrastructure taking place across her parent company WPP.

Ignacio Cruz just finished a Google Hangout discussing the implementation of a non-profit social media platform and one client who missed the meeting sent a GroupMe text asking for a quick recap.

Consulting in contemporary organizations requires consultants to use technology as a central part of their client communication strategy. Margaret, Celia, and Ignacio are real people actively engaged in different types of consulting, but what they have in common is the central role that technology plays as they communicate with their clients. In this chapter, we treat consulting as activities that advise and guide organizational members on how to implement and maintain positive change(s) within the organization, thereby improving the effectiveness of the organization or specific individuals therein (March, 1991). Consultants are most commonly thought of as people external to an organization, but there are also people within organizations who function as consultants, especially in large organizations undergoing major change initiatives. Since consulting includes working one-on-one in addition to working with teams, in this chapter we also incorporate examples of how technology is changing coaching practices as well as shifting how consulting occurs. Throughout this chapter, we combine our own consulting experiences with research literature, as well as providing extended examples that include the diverse experiences of Margaret, Celia, and Ignacio. Together, these examples demonstrate the range of technologies used in consulting and coaching today, and they provide a glimpse into the future of consulting.

## The Rising Use of Technology in Consulting Activities

Whether consulting inside an organization or working with external clients, consulting practices have changed over the past decade. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have influenced consulting by changing communication activities, speeding up feedback, increasing accessibility, and improving efficiency (Ahrend, Diamond, & Webber, 2010; Otte, Bangerter, Britsch, & Wuthrich, 2014; Rossett & Marino, 2005). For example, consulting and coaching most commonly occur over an extended period of time and many functions that consultants perform today can happen at a distance, clients and consultants no longer need to be co-located. Furthermore, as technology use in consulting and coaching practices has expanded, consultants and their clients are using mobile devices to connect on an interpersonal level as well as help them communicate. Mobile devices provide a different type of accessibility because calls, text messages, and internet access can happen 24 hours a day, regardless of where people are located. Both clients and consultants have many ICTs available to them, yet with these ICT options, there are new challenges in finding tools that all parties understand, have available, and use in productive ways.

Therefore, in this chapter, we call the mix of ICTs plus face-to-face (FtF) communication, combinatorial ICT use (Stephens, 2007; Stephens, Sørnes, Rice, Browning, & Sætre, 2008). This term not only fits much of the literature describing consulting interventions as using a mix of ICTs with FtF (e.g., Marshall & Rossett, 2011; Rossett & Marino, 2005), but it also meshes well with the examples our three professionals, Margaret, Celia, and Ignacio shared with us. Before we elaborate on the combinatorial ICTs used in consulting practices, let us discuss the backgrounds of our three professionals in more detail.

Margaret Keys is the owner of a top-tier speaking consulting company (see MargaretKeys.com), and she has a perspective on using technology to coach and consult that spans 30 years. She was coaching Dell executives when PowerPoint became the standard in giving presentations. She has coached clients on how to effectively use most types of technology presentation tools, speak on television and video, and negotiate their own career advances. She also uses technology and face-to-face communication to coach her global client base.

Celia Berk is the Chief Talent Officer at Young & Rubicam Group, one of the largest agency holding companies within WPP. She has held several executive positions within her firm over the past two decades and currently works in close partnership with its leaders to attract, develop and retain the best talent and promote collaboration across a global network comprised of some of the most powerful brands in marketing communications. She recently participated in a global IT re-structuring that will enable WPP to better serve its clients and strengthen its competitive position.

Twenty-one year old Ignacio Cruz is already sitting on the board of a national nonprofit organization, Advocates for Youth. He consults with them on how to use social media to help mobilize youth. It might sound odd, to have a 21 year old consultant, but he has expertise and experience that few people of any age have. He understands the issues on the minds of young people and he knows they like to text, tweet, and have access to information faster than anyone else. He does this consulting work while attending The University of Texas at Austin, where he is a McNair Scholar and on the Dean's List.

All three of these consulting professionals have varied experiences that provide a reality check on how ICTs are used in global organizations today. Margaret, Celia, and Ignacio use combinations of ICTs organically, in direct response to their clients' needs. Their stories and

examples support, explain, and sometimes contradict the research findings we also present in this chapter.

## Using Combinations of ICTs to Engage Clients and Drive Retention

The main reasons organizations hire and utilize consultants are to change their employees' behavior and to have those changes be sustained over time (Block, 2011; March, 1991). ICTs can help the consulting process by enabling clients to take an active role in their own interventions. Now clients can leverage their preferences for communication media, the pace of an intervention, and their access to external resources, thus allowing for a more personalized engagement. ICTs also help the consulting process by providing consultants a means of conducting thorough preliminary research on their clients to ensure a more effective and expeditious engagement. Finally, the variety of ICTs keeps tardy or absent clients connected to important conversations while allowing for effortless post-meeting follow-up. We begin our discussion of how ICTs enhance client engagement and retention by examining how ICT use fosters interactivity in consulting interventions.

### Combinatorial ICTs Better Facilitate Interactivity

Interactivity—the active engagement in dialogue to achieve goals—is essential in technology-mediated consulting interventions because it facilitates client-driven engagement. From a physical or structural perspective, interactivity refers to the affordances, features, or characteristics of technologies that create an interactive environment (Ramirez & Burgoon, 2004). From a perceptual or behavioral view, interactivity focuses on an individual's cognitive, perceptual and behavioral abilities and limitations when using technology (Ramirez & Burgoon, 2004). In the context of combinatorial ICT media use, interactivity often occurs through sequential, repetitive exchanges of inter-related messages between clients and consultants.

Combinatorial ICTs empower clients to initiate and self-regulate their learning, co-create a communal learning experience, and choose the technology that work best for their needs.

Having clients engaged in the consulting environment is desirable since interactivity helps clients receive advice that is relevant, timely and opportune (Warner, 2012).

There are myriad ways to incorporate interactivity into consulting interventions and many include technology (Bouchal, Fahs, Frei, Martin, Patton, & Stephens, 2012). ICTs allow clients to control the pace of an intervention by promoting a generative approach to learning. Generative learning situates the consultant as more of a peripheral guide than a central figure, while encouraging the client to actively create and apply new ideas (London & Hall, 2011). As such, a client can use ICTs not only to glean prescribed information, but also to link new ideas with existing knowledge, thus making discoveries in the process. Furthermore, self-regulation positively affects learning over time, even during the initial stages when learners experience higher cognitive load (Sitzmann, Bell, Kraiger & Kanar, 2009). The interactive affordances of many contemporary ICTs allow the client to socially construct a temporally personalized intervention (London & Hall, 2011). Essentially, ICTs help consulting interventions more closely meet client needs.

When consultants use a combination of ICTs, clients have flexibility and choice in how interventions are administered. Not every client will exhibit the same level of comfort or expertise with every ICT. What overwhelms some clients will bore others (Waldeck, 2008). Research suggests that many clients prefer using a combination of video and audio in their conversations and that a multi-modal approach is particularly effective (Marshall & Rossett, 2011; Rossett & Marino, 2005). An interactive graphic interface can often highlight the specific details needed for an intervention (London & Hall, 2011). Consultants and clients can work

together to revise documents online and use chat applications to discuss additional ideas (Davis (2012). Document sharing systems can facilitate a type of interaction that is less likely in a FtF environment (Davis, 2012; London & Hall, 2011). Many consultants, including the authors of this chapter, integrate videoconferencing to add a sense of direct involvement and use VoIP (voice over Internet protocol) plus audio recorders to summarize complex concepts into digestible sound bites (London & Hall, 2011). When provided the right combination of ICTs, clients are more likely to perceive the intervention as interactively stimulating (Warner, 2012).

ICTs also enhance interactivity in consulting interventions because they grant clients access to resources beyond the consultant. While working directly with clients, a consultant can pull up a YouTube video on a mobile device and show the clients a clear example of what they are recommending. Consultants can also refer clients to white papers that can provide additional support for a particular action path. These interactive, technology-mediated interventions work because they encourage communal learning and collaboration through online tools like message boards, access to shared files and media, virtual office hours with industry experts, and access to private industry networks, (London & Hall, 2011; Waldeck, 2008). Organizations and their members tend to be more satisfied with these types of interactive environments (Waldeck 2008) because socially-mediated discovery is often the end result (London & Hall, 2011).

#### Using ICTs Sequentially to Prepare and Reinforce Interventions

When using combinations of ICTs, it is important to view consulting interventions as processes that occur over time; one conversation leads to the next conversation. But before these conversations even begin, it is common for consultants to prepare for their first meetings by learning about their client. Communication scholars view this preparation as information-seeking behavior, and one particular theoretical model considers how people use ICTs to learn social information about others before they meet (Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, & Sunnafrank,

2002). These scholars claim that “communicators begin by gathering information passively, evaluate said information, and begin formulating impressions of others, which serves as the basis for determining whether or not to proceed interactively” (p. 224-225). Their model was situated in interpersonal interaction, something very relevant for consulting and coaching interventions. Considering how easy it is to search the internet for information about people and organizations today, there are many ways to seek information before engaging a client.

Take Margaret Keys for example. She uses a combination of technologies to help her prepare for meetings with new and existing clients. “YouTube is one of the most helpful technology tools to help me prepare to meet a client,” says Margaret. Many of her clients have presentations that are available on YouTube, TedTalks, or corporate websites, so she can preview their strengths and weaknesses before she meets with them. This saves her clients time and money and allows Margaret to see how they really perform in an actual high-stress situation.

Using ICTs to prepare for these interactions can enhance the efficiency of consulting interventions. Consultants can quickly match a solution with the client’s needs and resources before they meet with clients (Rossett & Marino, 2005). Consultants can also use ICTs to personalize messages and materials that better address the clients’ problems (Marshall & Rossett, 2011). For example, consultants often conduct a needs assessment early in the consulting encounter. By employing ICTs to locate and document pertinent information before, as opposed to during client meetings, consultants can reach their objectives swiftly and potentially end the engagement sooner (Averweg, 2010).

ICTs also help to inform clients who are late or miss consulting update meetings. For example, Ignacio Cruz explains that in his consulting meetings it is not uncommon for one of his clients to miss at least part of the meeting. The clients who miss the meeting want to get up to



speed quickly so they send a GroupMe message to Ignacio and his team and almost immediately they get a two sentence summary of what took people an hour to discuss. Sometimes that is enough content, but other times, it requires a direct conversation to keep the group moving forward. GroupMe is a group text messaging application where group members can chat in real time together. “Waiting for meeting minutes can take a day or more and GroupMe is so immediate,” explains Ignacio. Ignacio’s example demonstrates that newer ICTs, like GroupMe, and other team-based tools, can expand the communication options during the consulting process.

Celia and Margaret also believe that ICTs play an important role in following-up from meetings because ICTs help them summarize and focus messages around specific tasks. Even when all clients are present at meetings, both of these experienced professionals use a mix of email and other ICTs to reinforce their conversations. Margaret explains that a quick text message reminder to her client, who has flown to India and is ready to enter an important meeting, not only reinforces content, but also provides a level of support and encouragement needed to sustain their business relationship. People are busy today, and re-focusing and reminding clients of the key actions needed for progress are vital for successful coaching and consulting progress.

## Growth in Specific ICTs

To this point, we have referred to ICTs in aggregate as a general designation for the technology consultants may employ in interventions. However, it is important that we do highlight the individual ICTs that are paramount in the consultant’s repertoire. In this section, we discuss how newer, highly interactive media such as video and webconferencing enable consultants to coach clients from a distance. We also examine why FtF is still the go-to medium

to initiate engagements, build trust, and cultivate relationships. But first, we explain why the constant connectivity afforded by email makes this ICT vital to the consulting process.

#### Email is Still Important

Even though email is not a new ICT, it still plays a prominent role in how consulting messages are communicated and shared. With the advances in mobile technologies being another platform to access email, its use may still be rising. For example, Celia Berk explains that she “can’t see any other communication tool taking its place.” As her team was planning their global restructuring, emails were their way to share information on a 24/7 basis. Celia explains that when working on deadlines, her team is on email “all day, all night, and all weekend.” She has to take the responsibility to define the end of her day because the conversations never stop when they are global and time-sensitive. Furthermore, constant connections to people and conversations are vital and her team expects all members to return email messages promptly.

Celia has a clear opinion on how email became the primary business communication tool in her organization and her explanation begins with the tragedy of 9-11. Celia lives and works in Manhattan, NY and she vividly remembers how everyone instinctively reached for email to establish and maintain contact in the wake of the tragic events that occurred on September, 11, 2001. “Companies had already starting giving us devices to carry around so we would never break our connection with them. Then [after 9-11] we became addicted to the connection. This is a double edged sword,” says Celia. Researchers have summarized this double-edged sword by saying, “we have introduced a type of mobile logic into our interactions...and there is an emerging norm of connectedness, an assumption that all of us are available via a mobile phone.” (Ling & Donner, 2013, p. 135). We see the effects of this connectedness in Celia’s examples

and they highlight the challenges that consultants face when they must set boundaries between communicating with clients and having a personal life.

#### Video and Webconferences

In addition to using email as a core consulting tool, video and webconferencing are also being used in an attempt to personalize and provide interactive opportunities for clients. Video includes traditional videoconferencing as well as desktop and mobile video tools and apps. Webconferencing is a blended platform best described as an audio-bridge or voice over the internet combined with a web-based tool that allows people to share slides, jointly edit on whiteboards, or chat. Webconferencing offers a mixture of interactive tools that are not available on stand-alone video platforms (Stephens & Mottet, 2008).

Videoconferencing and webconferencing use has increased considerably in the past decade, especially for coaching interventions. For example, Sherpa's 2014 survey of over 21,000 internal and external organizational coaches from over 50 countries suggests that nearly 40% of the coaching is being delivered with webcams. This represents a quadrupling in the past four years since they began conducting this survey. It is noteworthy that webcams are not necessarily replacing face-to-face coaching but, as high-definition video-conferencing continues to improve, some people speculate that we might see this trend shift (Sherpa, 2014).

Ignacio Cruz explains that in between FtF meetings with clients, he has monthly meetings where, "we do the Google Hangout or Go-to-Meeting; it depends on who manages the meeting." Both Google Hangout and Go-to-Meeting are online tools that help groups meet online. He prefers Google Hangout because when there is a live video feed broadcast to all 10 team members, access to video information holds everyone accountable. He calls it, "making us meet FtF online." When using Go-to-Meeting, Ignacio describes it as a traditional webconference with an audio feed and slides. He says that these meetings are longer, more of a one-way

communication mode, and often fail in keeping people accountable. Accountability is vitally important in consulting because clients are paying for outcomes. Consultants must find ICTs that reinforce this accountability because even when it is the client's fault that there is limited progress, the consultant is deemed responsible for the outcomes. Ignacio's example shows how switching the meeting mode to include more interactive and visual cues can subtly pressure clients to engage and participate.

#### E-Coaching and New Terms Involving Combinations of ICTs

The extensive use of videoconferencing, webconferencing, and other distance ICTs for consulting and coaching has led to the development of new terms that often describe very similar practices. This is especially prominent in the coaching literature. For example, the term *e-coaching* can mean online coaching, virtual coaching, distance coaching, or video coaching. Geissler and colleagues (2014) describe e-coaching as "coaching mediated through modern media...characterized by replacing face to face communication with modern media" (p. 166). They also acknowledge that e-coaching can be combined with face-to-face communication but they refer to that combination as blended coaching. Essentially the coaching literature has a similar problem to the workplace technology use literature (e.g., Stephens, 2007; Stephens et al., 2008); *defining* how ICTs and face-to-face conversations work together to help people achieve their objectives is difficult. Yet it is more common for consultants to use a combination of ICTs than rely on a single device or communication medium.

#### FtF Still Matters

Even though most consultants use a mix of ICTs in their daily work, many of them insist that the relationships they create through in-person meetings are unparalleled. Quite often consultants will insist on meeting face-to-face for kick-off meetings and for important milestones throughout engagements. Margaret Keys says that trust is built best in person and if she is going

to make significant breakthroughs with clients and change behavior, she needs to see them FtF. Ignacio explains that his client, Advocates for Youth, values FtF meetings so much that they insist that everyone meet FtF in Washington, DC two times a year. Ignacio says that this FtF time is spent on strategic issues like decision making and conducting leadership training. Celia Berk believes that the human touch must include FtF communication, even when it means flying people around the globe to meet in person. These in-person meetings allow people to discuss important topics and build trusting relationships that help them weather difficult situations that arise in the future.

## Advantages of Distance Consulting & Coaching

Incorporating ICTs to guide remote interventions has several benefits. Technology-mediated distance consulting and coaching can be less expensive than traditional FtF consulting, more convenient, and optimized to meet the needs of the particular client and consulting engagement. In this section, we specifically address how distance consulting and coaching adds economic value, enhances focus on the intervention, creates tighter feedback loops between consultants and their clients, and promotes accessibility to more employees. We begin by explaining how a technology-mediated intervention can be an efficient option.

### Efficiency and Convenience

Consulting fees, which are often heavily laden with travel costs, can add up. Distance consulting and coaching, often reduces travel costs while still contributing similar benefits of motivation, direction, and information (Rossett & Marino, 2005). Imagine being a consultant in California and having a client in New York. Update meetings might only need to last two hours, but the time it takes for the consultant to travel to New York, have the meeting, and return home, will take at least one to two days and the consulting fee will reflect that travel time. In essence,

administering consulting expertise via ICTs removes some of the traditional monetary barriers and provides many organizations a lower cost option that retains many of the positive attributes of an in-person intervention (Ahrend et al., 2010). Thus, cost containment is a major reason organizations consider using distance coaching and consulting (Warner 2012).

Distance interventions often are more convenient for both the consultant and the client. An employee in the field does not have to leave the field to take part in meetings or training. The consultant need not travel to the client's office to conduct a meeting or training session. In fact, ICTs allow consultants to be in multiple places at the same time (Rossett & Marino, 2005). This is key as it allows for a virtual connection with geographically dispersed members of a consulting intervention. In line with the global operating environment of contemporary organizations, distance coaching and consulting is also convenient for foreign employees and non-native English speakers. A mediated interaction allows these individuals more time to check their grammar and word choice than a FtF meeting (Davis, 2012).

While not all consulting interventions can thrive relying on ICTs, these tools can open doors for new forms of participation. Ignacio says that communicating online is a challenge, but has many advantages as well. He was traveling in Ghana and he still attended the monthly online meeting to check in with his client. Ignacio claims that meeting regularly online makes FtF meetings more comfortable. He feels like he knows people's life stories because he "sees them once a month online. I know them better than people I see physically once every two weeks in my FtF meetings." Once again we see advantages of technology and the combinatorial use of ICTs for maintaining client relationships.

#### Documentation and Focus

The mediated nature of distance coaching and consulting also allows consultants to document and archive interventions. Email and chat discussion threads become valuable corpora

of text that many employees and consultants may save and analyze to surface recurring themes (Rosset & Marino, 2005). Employees may also record textual, audio and/or video content to share progress and ideas with other individuals or groups within the organization (Averweg, 2010). Emerging leaders in the organization may use these saved virtual exchanges to assess the intervention's effectiveness (Backus, et al., 2010). Consultants may track themes derived from archived coaching sessions to scale their intervention between an individual employee and the larger organization (Rossett & Marino, 2005).

Many mediated ICTs reduce the number of social cues available during an intervention; thus the intervention changes and can occur more quickly. While this can be disadvantage, as we will discuss later in this chapter, it also can allow consultants and their clients an opportunity to focus on the task at hand. For example, in voice and text-based media, distractions such as visual indicators of class, race, or gender are filtered out, allowing for singular focus and faster progress (Davis, 2012). Also, in some cases, it takes less time for users to comprehend content presented electronically than in FtF exchanges (Warner, 2012). These are some of the reasons that distance coaching and consulting can be more time efficient while still accomplishing the intervention goals in fewer meetings than a conventional in-person arrangement (Averweg, 2010).

Immediate and Brief Feedback is a Key Advantage of Mobile Devices

One of the biggest advantages of using ICTs to continue conversations with clients is that almost all knowledge workers have access to personal communication technologies like mobile phones. These multifunctional devices can serve as audio and video-recorders in addition to communication tools like talking on the phone and sending text messages. Furthermore, these devices can be used unobtrusively to gather valuable data to help a consultant coach a client.

The constant connection that people have with their mobile devices also speeds up conversations and feedback to a true just-in-time system. Margaret Keys often coaches corporate executives and her clients often present in private situations where she cannot directly observe them and recording is prohibited. The closest thing she has to being physically present is being connected through mobile ICTs. Her clients can update her or ask for advice using text messaging, and she can give near-real-time feedback. The brief messages are often exactly what her clients need in the moment and limited content is all they have time to read and digest.

#### ICTs Extend Involvement to Multiple Organizational Levels

There was a time when consulting interventions were limited to high level engagements with organizational leadership. While that is still the case in many consulting engagements today, the integration of ICTs has enabled nearly all organizational members to be included in some types of consulting situations. One particular situation where ICTs have extended involvement is in peoples' ability to seek out and receive coaching (Backus et al., 2010; Rossett & Marino, 2005; Warner, 2012). Even non-management employees now have access to qualified experts through search engines or databases (Rossett & Marino, 2005). Users exercise greater control over their learning experience by selecting coaches from different backgrounds and locations with varying levels of knowledge and experience (Backus et al., 2010).

In addition to the enhanced precision in distance coaching, there is also a greater degree of accessibility. Because the conversations and meetings can be technology-mediated, proximity is less of an issue. A consultant can easily provide resources, solutions, and motivating conversations to staff at multiple levels in any geographic location and at convenient times (Rossett & Marino, 2005). Additionally, distance interventions allow coaches to respond to employees' queries at times more convenient to the client (Marshall & Rossett, 2011).

Essentially, through distance coaching and consulting, staff at many levels have the flexibility to



receive the practical expertise they need, when they need it, and implement the advice quickly (Ahrend et al., 2010; Warner, 2012).

## Challenges of Distance Coaching & Consulting

While benefits such as low cost and the affordances of archiving or rapid feedback make distance coaching and consulting appear to be more advantageous, there are some key drawbacks worth noting. This section delves into some of the challenges presented by distance coaching and consulting. We will examine how ICTs encourage an expectancy of accessibility on the part of clients, regardless of time or space. We will also explore the necessity of the “human touch” and the functional limitations of ICTs in a consultative context. Additionally, we address the equivocal role generational difference may play in distance coaching and consulting moving forward. First, we examine trends in multitasking and how that might affect consulting interactions.

### Multitasking and Multicommunicating

Being distracted when pretending to be focused is a problem for telephone distance coaching and consulting. Both the consultant and the people being coached need to understand how to pay close attention to verbal conversations. Margaret Keys is a master at listening closely and she explains that she “listens with her eyes closed to give her undivided attention to her client.” But multitasking, or doing multiple things at once, is tempting when others cannot see what you are doing. Furthermore, Celia explains that “everyone is multitasking during conference calls.” She explains that people “half listen to a number of things” because that is the efficient thing to do. In other studies conducted by the first author of this chapter, consultants have confessed, “I’ve put clients on mute so I could order through a drive-through during our hour long phone conversation.” Another consultant described how she scheduled some clients

during her morning commute because she needed to work around their schedules on a European time zone. These honest comments describe the working reality of global consultants and the types of task-interweaving that mobility affords.

While many people think they can multitask, well-established and recent research questions their assumptions (e.g., Ophir, Nass, & Wagner, 2009; Rogers & Monsell, 1995). Stroop (1935), a psychologist, is often credited with initially documenting how the brain cannot process multiple simultaneous tasks because they interfere with one another. Since that time, the field of psychology has shown that cognitive multitasking almost always leads to decreased performance (e.g., Rogers & Monsell, 1995; Stroop, 1935). While some scholars believe that people performing repetitive tasks might become more practiced (e.g., Ophir et al., 2009), cognitive processes, like consulting conversations, will likely suffer when people switch tasks.

But when others cannot see your behaviors, it is really easy to check email, send a text message, or drift off momentarily. Carrying on multiple conversations simultaneously through ICTs is a specialized form of multitasking called multicomputing. Multicomputing is the practice of engaging in two or more overlapping conversations facilitated by the use of synchronous and near-synchronous media such as face-to-face conversation, phone, videoconferencing, email, and chat (Reinsch, Turner & Tinsley, 2008). In organizations, multicomputing may occur during mediated conversations as well as FtF encounters, like meetings (Stephens & Davis, 2009). Message ambiguity and the status of communication partners are two items that significantly encourage or discourage multicomputing (Turner & Reinsch, 2007). Sometimes people need to multicompute during a consulting conversation and research suggests that people feel they have multicomputed successfully when they

satisfactorily minimize communication errors and simulate active listening (Turner & Reinsch, 2010).

Researchers have found that multiple conversations, sometimes to get a jump on the action items emerging from a conversation or even to add running commentary with a colleague, occur through instant messaging, email, and text messaging while people are still on an audio call (e.g., Stephens & Davis, 2009; Stephens, 2012). Celia confirms that many of these side conversations are necessary to help her global team make decisions as quickly as they need to. “People are emailing colleagues sitting across the table and colleagues sitting across the world from them, because they need to better understand the issues and waiting until after a meeting will simply slow down the process,” explains Celia.

Global organizations also experience some confusion due to limited contextual cues when comments are put in writing. Celia explains that people need to consider translation differences and take the time to truly understand the meaning of specific words. This issue is heightened in a fast-paced communication environment where people skim multiple replies to long email trails. Consultants must be aware of these cultural differences and realize that ICTs can actually heighten problems in some situations.

#### Temptation to be Always On

Several researchers have uncovered that there are paradoxes created with our constant connections and the outcomes vary with work context and with expectations of mobile device use (Jarvenpaa & Lang, 2005; Mazmanian, 2012; Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013). Jarvanpaa and Lang (2005) provide a thorough description of how mobile ICTs can both enslave and empower individuals and that people use ICTs in diverse ways. Mazmanian (2012) examined two different occupational contexts in the same organization and found that it is a

combination of the norms that groups enact and individual practices that influence how people perceive their mobile devices.

It is safe to say that Celia's group expects accessibility and that extends around the clock with many of their global teams. Even though Celia functions as an internal organizational advisor and executive, the issues of expected accessibility are similar for external consultants. Margaret coaches many clients who need to perform under intense pressure. During these pressure situations, Margaret's clients expect her to be accessible. This is one of the many reasons that Margaret extensively relies on her mobile phone and it is with her everywhere.

Sometimes Limited Technology Is Most Beneficial

All three of our experienced professionals described through this chapter have mentioned that there are times that using a mix of technologies does not help them achieve their goals. Celia explains that her organization began the IT restructuring project by getting all the companies in a specific region of the world to think regionally, not company-specific. This required talking openly about concerns, spending days in the field meeting with key people, and getting them together to meet face-to-face. With such a major organizational change, Celia says, "technology does not take the place of the relationship. Start with the human touch." She wanted to have people in each region build bridges to help one another through such a major change.

Margaret is quick to say that the greatest gift she gives her clients is her ability to "listen deeply," and that can be hurt with too much technology. Whether it is meeting in person or coaching on the phone, Margaret believes that "closing her eyes to listen," is what allows her to really hear her clients' messages. She says that Skype and video feedback can be distracting in many of her coaching situations because they "mislead her into thinking that she has a deeper understanding of her client than she actually does." Margaret reminds us that technology can be helpful, but nothing can substitute for being face-to-face and finding that true connection with

another person. It is during that close in-person work that people are willing to take the biggest risks and trust their coach.

#### Challenges of Using ICTs as Part of Consulting Interventions

While ICTs have the capability to help consultants interact with clients, they also present some challenges. Probably the biggest issue is that ICTs do not always work. Meetings can be delayed and clients and consultants can spend considerable time troubleshooting internet and telephone connections. In addition, consulting interventions can be harmed with people misunderstanding time zone differences and jumping onto conference calls after they begin.

Another challenge of using ICTs is that they might replace some of the current human consulting and coaching in the future. Recently, there has been growth in an area called automated e-coaching, and although these platforms are still in the early phases of implementation, they hold some promise for certain types of consulting interventions.

Automated e-coaching systems provide performance coaching through an asynchronous, non-human, computer-mediated interface (Warner, 2012). These autonomous systems represent a contemporary iteration of decision support systems, designed to guide and promote individual self-improvement (Kamphorst & Kalis, 2013; Warner, 2012). To this end, e-coaching systems incorporate e-learning technologies to generate interactive, adaptively derived responses to user inputs (Paramythis & Loidl-Reisinger, 2004; Warner, 2012). As users interact with the system more frequently over time, the system enhances their learning by understanding the users' patterns and needs. While these systems need considerable work to make them viable in consulting practices, they could offer considerable advantages to clients and further expand the accessibility of coaching in particular.

## Coaching and Consulting Future Generations

While the research literature on younger generations cautions us to interpret generational difference with care, there are some differences worthy of discussion here. First, younger generations are growing up with more mobile ICTs than any generation before. While these tools are also available to workers in all generations, younger people use a mix of ICTs and often report higher comfort with these devices (Myers & Sadaghini, 2010). Communication researchers also note that younger people have a high desire to work in teams and they want to contribute to their employing organizations (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Celia Berk has also noticed some significant work-preference differences when she hires, trains, and observes the young talent in her organization. These observations, combined with the current research provide us reasons to speculate concerning how consulting interventions might change in the future.

One future possibility is that distance consulting will be viewed as sufficient to develop an acceptable level of trust. For example, in Celia's role as Chief Talent Officer, she has the opportunity to help hire and train new college graduates who are entering a wide range of individual companies and teams. She gets to observe quite a few young people who enter through internship programs and she says there is a significant shift in how younger new hires view collaboration. She recounts how one company recently brought a group of digitally-savvy summer interns together in a room to brainstorm around a business problem. As the company's HR Director watched the group, she noticed that the team members immediately opened up their mobile devices and starting collaborating silently. In fact, they seemed almost perplexed by the need to be together physically. They were working at a distance while in the same room. The HR Director was struck by what she observed, and felt certain that she was seeing a glimpse into the future of working relationships. The work they produced was good. The HR Director could

see that some quieter interns could more easily be “heard” in a digital collaboration space. Celia considers this anecdote a clue about the formation of digital working relationships, and while it is too early to tell if this is a trend, she is watching it closely. Perhaps trust is built differently in these digital relationships; it is the value of the information you find and share with the group that determines the quality of your relationship.

While the three experienced professionals we interviewed to provide our extended examples valued FtF communication extensively, consulting practices could change as a younger generation brings their communication preferences into consulting interventions. It is too early to tell if this will change consulting in the future, because even twenty-one year old Ignacio still values FtF connections. What we may be seeing is a generation that realizes that global conversations necessitate extensive ICT use because FtF is a luxury that is often cost-prohibitive. Furthermore, as coaching practices move to a less senior audience, these younger workers will benefit from the increased accessibility and decreased cost of electronic and distance coaching opportunities. They may accept virtual coaching, consulting, and communication practices as the norm, and not expect FtF contact. Research suggests that communicating at a distance can still build close relationships over time, but these relationship-building processes that occur exclusively using ICTs, takes longer to reach the level of satisfaction and benefits of the relationships found with FtF communication (Walther, 1992).

## Summary

In this chapter, we have examined the role of ICT use in consulting interventions by juxtaposing real world examples from actual consultants with relevant contemporary research from a variety of disciplines. We have discussed how combinatorial ICT use helps consultants prepare for client meetings, promote interactivity during interventions, and reinforce the

commitments reached. We have offered reasons why distance coaching and consulting can be advantageous as well as identified some of the risks that come with this practice. Finally, we look forward toward the future of ICT use in consulting, noting the rise of automated e-coaching and forecasting how millennials may further incorporate technology into consulting interventions as baby boomers age out of the workforce.

Organizations operate in environments that change continuously. This state of flux often necessitates the use of consultants to help clients adapt and improve. As ICTs become more diverse and ubiquitous, it will be important to watch consultants integrate them into their charge of moving organizations and individuals forward.



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