

# Can we talk? Texting doesn't fix things, and yet we're all typing away

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Although text messaging feels instant and convenient, it has been associated with lower time efficiency, lower likelihood of consensus, and poorer relational outcomes than other communication channels. These negative effects are more likely when text messaging is used to resolve complex issues. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

## Can we talk? Texting doesn't fix things, and yet we're all typing away

Research shows text negotiations take nearly twice as long, produce worse outcomes and leave both parties angrier.

**Dorcas Quek Anderson**

Angeline only meant to send a quick reminder while on her computer.

As a supervisor in a company, she messaged Bob on Microsoft Teams about an approaching deadline. Bob messaged back that he needed more time, insisting the deadline could not be met.

Angeline typed a reply, deleted, retyped, and felt her irritation rising with every back-and-forth communication. She eventually stopped responding.

Five minutes later, Bob walked past Angeline's office without a greeting or glance. Angeline wondered why he did not simply step in and speak to her about what happened.

This is probably a familiar scene in many workplaces. Inundated by deadlines, overflowing inboxes, and back-to-back meetings, we try and protect our mental space so that we can get on with the "real" work. We set our default status to "can't talk, text me". We instinctively message colleagues, hoping to complete our tasks efficiently.

However, some text exchanges stretch far longer than expected, fail to clear the next item on our to-do list, and leave behind something more difficult to manage: tension with the people we work with.

A 2025 study found that 75 per cent of employees use Microsoft Enterprise chat tools to communicate with other co-workers. And 94 per cent of Singapore workers actively use consumer apps such as WhatsApp for sensitive discussions, well above the global average of 83 per

cent.

However, is our heavy reliance on instant messaging at work as efficient as we might think?

### WORKPLACE CONVERSATIONS ARE NEGOTIATIONS

Although text messaging feels instant and convenient, it has been associated with lower time efficiency, lower likelihood of consensus, and poorer relational outcomes than other communication channels. These negative effects are more likely when text messaging is used to resolve complex issues.

Over the last two decades, several studies have shown that negotiation outcomes arrived at through text messaging were poorer than those reached through videoconferencing, phone calls or face-to-face interaction.

Take the findings of a recent Singapore study led by this author on complex negotiations in a workplace setting. Four hundred participants took part in a negotiation simulation involving two co-workers who had to discuss the quality of their joint report and agree on a completion timeline.

Participants were randomly assigned to negotiate with one another through one of four communication channels: face-to-face, videoconferencing, audio call, or text messaging. WhatsApp was used for texting to reflect the way corporate instant messaging tools are commonly used in workplaces.

The results for text negotiations were dismal across all outcomes. Text negotiations had the lowest rate of agreement and required the longest duration to reach an agreement: a mean of 53 minutes compared to 29 to 32 minutes for

the other media.

When the scores of each pair of negotiators were totalled based on agreed outcomes, this joint quality of outcome was lower in text negotiations than video or audio negotiations. And text negotiators reported the lowest ratings on perceived communication effectiveness.

Text negotiations were also associated with lower rapport levels and weaker desire to interact with the same person in the future. Notably, text messaging was the only medium associated with negative emotions such as anger.

One text exchange illustrates how quickly frustration can escalate in this medium. After about 20 minutes of texting without reaching any agreement, both parties became increasingly frustrated during a fairly complex discussion over the number of

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case studies to include in their joint report.

Although they eventually reached an agreement, one later reported feeling angry, while the other felt sensitive about the accusations raised during the text exchange.

Notably, these negative effects surfaced not only in the negotiators' relationships, but also in the joint quality of the solutions they reached, which were sub-optimal compared to those using other media.

Such poor outcomes can have serious implications for a company's economic health. Zoom's 2024 study estimates that the time leaders spend resolving collaboration issues have cost organisations up to US\$16,491 (S\$21,280) per manager annually in inefficient productivity.

### WHY TEXTING IS A POOR FIT

Texting relies on words alone and is devoid of visual and vocal cues that help us interpret tone and emotion more holistically. Without them, anonymity and psychological distance are heightened.

The Singapore study also suggests that participants experienced a poor fit between text messaging and the workplace matter they were asked to resolve. One participant observed that text messaging felt more suitable for casual exchanges instead of the workplace setting, which required more formal language and tone.

As participants used more formal language, many became impatient with the time taken by their counterparts to respond. What was meant to be efficient felt slow, strained and frustrating.

These findings may not appear to match our everyday experience. After all, many of us are accustomed to connecting with friends through texting using emojis and informal expressions.

However, this depends on the context. Text messaging may work well for simpler issues – for example, in price negotiations to buy or sell something.

The Singapore study indicates that it is far less reliable when workplace issues become more complex. Matters such as deadlines may seem simple, but they often involve deeper personal concerns including perceived fairness in distribution of responsibilities, respect of personal boundaries, or perceptions of competence.

### CHOOSING THE RIGHT COMMUNICATION CHANNEL

If text messaging is inappropriate for dealing with complex work issues, does the solution lie in more in-person meetings, that may not necessarily be more time-efficient?

The Singapore study found very few differences in outcomes between audio, Zoom

videoconferencing and face-to-face negotiations. Apart from higher trust levels for in-person communication, the results were comparable for relational outcomes including rapport and willingness to interact in the future.

Surprisingly, audio communication – essentially a Zoom meeting without the webcam – produced positive outcomes, even surpassing face-to-face negotiations in joint quality of outcome.

Perhaps the benefits of the humble phone call have been neglected. Research suggests that audio communication helps communicators focus more closely on the content of a conversation because visual cues are absent.

Voice has also been shown to be a powerful channel for communicating emotions, through pitch, cadence and pace. Indeed, studies have found that emotions can be judged more accurately from voice than facial expressions alone.

This may explain the favourable results of audio negotiations in the study. It need not be a conventional phone call, though, but a Zoom or Teams meeting without turning on the webcam.

For many millennials and Gen Zers, this might not be the conclusion they were looking for. A study by recruitment specialist Robert Walters in 2024 found that 50 per cent of this group feel uncomfortable making business calls. Such anxiety often arises because of the lack of control in responding to live, unscripted conversations, or even being caught unprepared by an unexpected call.

These concerns could be addressed by scheduling the call and sharing the intended agenda, which will allow everyone to prepare for the conversation. More importantly, we need to recognise the substantial benefits we gain from overcoming this anxiety.

Instant messaging remains efficient and convenient in our hybrid work environment. Where a shared solution is required, instead of defaulting to texting, finding a more appropriate way to have that chat can lead to better outcomes.

Angeline was not wrong to message Bob. However, after the conversation had clearly developed into more than a reminder, the more efficient response may have been to text, "This seems easier to discuss in person. Can we speak at 10am for around five minutes?"

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