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12 examples of communication barriers and how to overcome them

SEEK content team – updated on 13 December, 2023

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There are many factors that can impact our ability to convey a point or message.

The good news is that some of these factors are within our control. From physical to emotional, cultural and even technological, barriers to communication can lead to misunderstanding and frustration in both personal and professional settings.

In this guide, we'll answer what are barriers to effective communication, delve into 12 different types, provide real-world examples, and practical strategies to overcome them. Let's take a look!

Causes of communication barriers

Before we dive into the different types of communication constraints, it's important to understand what causes a barrier in communication. Knowing and understanding each of these helps us become more aware of them, while giving space to overcome them.

Differences in language and culture

Language and culture are two common factors that can create communication barriers. What means something in one culture, may have a different meaning in another. Words can easily become lost in translation or there may be a misunderstanding because of cultural 'norms'.

Even in the same language, regional dialects or industry-specific jargon can easily lead to confusion. This also goes for gestures and body language. What may be okay in one culture, may have negative connotations in others.

Physical barriers

As its name suggests, physical barriers are physical obstacles that can interupt effective communication. This can be things like noise, distance or even technology that isn't up to speed. For example, trying to have a conversation in a noisy factory can make it nearly impossible to hear and understand each other, leading to a breakdown in communication.

Emotional and psychological barriers

Our emotions and psychological states can significantly impact how we communicate with others, both in a personal and business setting. Stress, anxiety, and other emotions can completely change the way we interpret messages. For instance, someone who is feeling anxious may misinterpret neutral statements as

negative, leading to unnecessary conflict or misunderstanding.

Attitudinal barriers

Attitudinal barriers come from personality conflicts, poor management, or a lack of motivation to communicate effectively. They can also arise when people think and act based on the wrong assumption or information. These barriers are more often seen within business relationships, where the hierarchy of leadership or a lack of openness within the workplace can prevent the flow of communication. For example, an employee might hesitate to share constructive feedback due to fear of how it will be received by managers.

Perceptual barriers

Perception is the way we view the world around us, and perceptual barriers occur when people have different viewpoints, interpretations, or biases. These barriers can prevent effective communication when people aren't on the same page. For example, two people might read the same email but interpret its tone differently, leading to different emotional reactions.

Types of barriers of communication

Now we've looked at the causes, it's time to dive into the different types of barriers that exist. Each one comes with its own unique set of challenges and solutions. However, understanding the different types can be a great first step in overcoming them.

So, what are barriers of communication? They're the obstacles that stand in the way of clear, effective communication between a person or a group. From verbal to non-verbal and even written, we'll take a look at three types of barriers that you're likely to encounter and practical tips for overcoming them.

Verbal barriers

What better way to communicate than by talking face-to-face with someone? While verbal communication is the most straightforward form of communication, it comes with its own set of challenges. The words we choose, how we structure our sentences and even tone of voice can either help your message, or hinder it. Here are some of the most common verbal barriers.

Language barriers

It is hard to get on the same page when two people don't speak the same language. These language barriers can often cause misunderstandings and lead to confusion. In these instances, translation technology or even relying more on non-verbal communication are both helpful tools, where an interpreter isn't available. Even accents and regional dialects can still pose challenges, even if both people speak the same language.

Lack of clarity and conciseness

Speaking clearly is an important factor of effective communication. Overcomplicating sentences, using ambiguous words and rambling can leave the listener feeling confused about what you're trying to say. Instead, try to keep your communication short, sharp and to the point - especially if you're presenting a new idea or trying to make a business case around a certain issue.

Use of jargon and technical terms

Every industry has its own set of jargon and technical terms, which may not make sense to others outside of the field. From medical terms to certain technologies and even processes in sales roles, these terms can actually help communicate with the right audience. However, they can also serve as a barrier when communicating with people outside that group - especially if they have no prior understanding of the industry. So, use jargon sparingly and on a case-by-case basis.

Tone and inflection

The tone of your voice and the way you emphasise certain points can change the meaning of your words. Known as tone and inflection, this key verbal communication skill can also create a barrier. For example, the same sentence can be interpreted differently depending on what is said. One person may take it seriously, while another may think you're being sarcastic or joking.

Non-verbal barriers

We often place so much emphasis on the verbal side of communication, without realising the role that non-verbal cues also play. Equally as important, these cues can either complement your words, or act as a barrier. Here's some of the most common non-verbal obstacles to clear communication.

Body language and gestures

Body language and gestures are the movements made while talking. They can often give away details of how you're feeling and what you're thinking - even when you don't mean to.

While body language is a great way to engage your audience, it can also be a barrier when misinterpreted or your gestures contradict what you're saying. For example, crossed arms are often a sign of defensiveness, even if the spoken words are friendly and open. Nodding your head, on the other hand, may be seen as encouraging, giving the speaker more confidence to continue talking.

Facial expressions

Just like body language and gestures, our facial expressions will often show what we're thinking, without us needing to say anything at all. A smile, a frown, or a raised eyebrow can add layers of meaning to a conversation - and you may not even realise you're doing it.

Facial expressions can create barriers when they don't match the words you're saying, or are misinterpreted due to cultural differences. In some cases, it can be hard to remain aware of our expressions, however it's an important thing to keep in mind when you're communicating with others.

Eye contact

If you think maintaining eye contact is a sign of paying attention, you're right! This important element of non-verbal communication can help us focus and even understand what the other person is trying to say. However, on the flip side, too much eye contact can create discomfort, with some cultures believing eye contact to be a form of aggression. So, it's important to find a balance, and you can do so with practice.

Distance and physical space

Have you ever tried to talk to someone on the other side of the room? Perhaps they're standing just out of earshot? Whether it's across a room or even outside, things like noise, distance and the space around you can all act as barriers to communication.

So it's possible to stand too far away, but is it possible to be too close? Definitely!

Being in another's personal space can come across as intrusive, and since everyone's personal bubble is different, it's best to take their cues if you're unsure. For example, if you're too close, the other person may take a step back or lean away.

Written barriers

In our digital age, there's no denying that written communication is more important than ever. Whether it's emails, texts, or social media posts, the written word is used every day to share thoughts, feelings, and important messages.

However, just like verbal and non-verbal forms of communication, there are some barriers that can get in the way of effective written communication. Here's some of the most common barriers that can muddle your message.

Poor grammar and spelling

Have you ever scrolled on a local news post, or found a product that looks great, only to find the description littered with typos? Poor grammar and spelling can easily undermine the credibility of your message - no matter how well formed it is. The difference between 'their', 'they're' and 'there' might seem trivial, but it can place a seed of doubt in the reader's mind.

These mistakes can also have consequences in the workplace. Even a simple typo can cause a loss of business and even damage a brand. It's important to always double check your work, and if in doubt, look it up.

Incorrect use of punctuation

Punctuation marks are the 'traffic signals' of language, helping to guide the reader through the text. The wrong use of punctuation can completely change the meaning of a sentence and make it confusing. The absence of a comma in even the most simple sentence can lead to misunderstandings that could have been avoided. Everyone has heard the example of, 'Let's eat grandma' and 'Let's eat, grandma'. While commonly used, it's a great example of how one symbol can change the entire meaning of a sentence.

Poor sentence structure

The structure of your sentences can also serve as a barrier to effective written communication. Run-on or overly complex sentences - that is, sentences that are

very long - can make the text hard to follow. When the sentences drag on, the reader can easily lose interest, misunderstand or even forget the original message.

As a tip, try and add some variety to your sentences, switching out between longer and shorter sentences. When in doubt, keep it short and simple. Of course, this can also depend on what you're writing - a work email will be different to a social media post.

Lack of organisation and coherence

Well-organised text that follows a logical structure is easier to understand than their disorganised counterparts. A lack of organisation can make even the most well-intentioned message confusing and difficult to follow, while a well-organised message can be more persuasive. Logical flow, clear headings, bullet points (if needed) and concise paragraphs are all important for effective written communication.

How to overcome common barriers to communication

There are a large number of roadblocks that can pop up in different situations, all of which have an impact on effective communication. By understanding the different types of barriers in communication, you can focus on strategies to help overcome these challenges.

Do your research

One of the first steps in breaking down barriers is improving your language and cultural skills. If you know language is going to be a barrier beforehand, a little research goes a long way. You don't have to be fluent in multiple languages - as nice as that would be! Even learning basic phrases, such as greetings, or understanding the cultural etiquette of your audience, can go a long way.

Choose the right medium

Not all communication channels are suitable for every type of message. For example, complex instructions that need to be remembered are often better communicated via email rather than a phone call. While a private message can serve just fine for a quick reminder.

Sometimes you can even combine mediums. If you send a list of instructions over email, then follow up with a phone call to go through each of the points, making

sure that the receiver understands. Making this choice wisely can reduce misunderstandings and ensure your message is received as you intended.

Keep the message clear

Who are you writing or talking to? What is your intended audience? Knowing this core motivator will help you keep your message as clear as possible. And before you hit that 'enter' button, reread your written communication back out loud. In verbal communication, take pauses in conversation to make sure your sentences are clear and concise. Avoid jargon or complex sentences, as these can muddle up your message and cause confusion. The simpler and more direct your message, the better.

Maintain neutral body language

Our non-verbal cues are generally subconscious, yet they can speak much louder than words. Before you strike up a conversation, make note of your body language, facial expressions and eye contact. From there, adjust your gestures to suit the conversation.

Heading into a job interview? Pull your shoulders back and smile. If you're hosting a presentation, then you may want to use hand gestures to show enthusiasm and passion. Again, it's about knowing your audience and being aware of the barriers that might arise.

Practise active listening

When it comes to effective communication, listening is just as important as speaking. When it's not your turn to talk, practise active listening. More than simply waiting for your turn to talk, active listening involves fully concentrating, understanding, and responding to the other person - both non-verbally and through spoken response. This not only shows that you respect what the other person is saying, but also helps you better understand their message.

Use empathy to understand the other person

Empathy is an essential interpersonal skill. It helps us tap into the needs of others, without having to ask them what's going on. This is why empathy is an important aspect of effective communication.

Being able to understand the emotional context in which a message is delivered

can help you navigate any emotional and psychological barriers that might arise. This involves understanding the feelings and viewpoints of others and taking them into account, and not getting defensive if they don't see things your way.

Clarify anything you don't understand

Lastly, make sure to clarify any points that may seem unclear to you. There's no such thing as a stupid question, so don't worry about being judged for asking. It's actually a sign of confidence and respect in both yourself and the other person to seek clarification.

Asking the question ensures you both understand what's being communicated, reducing the chances of confusion and giving the other person a chance to rectify if there has been a misunderstanding. By implementing these strategies, you can successfully navigate around communication constraints and barriers, making sure you enjoy open communication in every situation.

Communication barriers in specific contexts

While we've got a good understanding of the different roadblocks that can arise, it's important to note these barriers can appear differently, depending on the context. Each setting, whether it's the workplace, intercultural interactions, family dynamics, or education, presents its own unique challenges. Here are some examples in different settings.

In the workplace

These barriers can often arise from management structures, where employees might hesitate to share constructive feedback with their superiors. Other things can also influence this, such as how the workplace is organised, and the flow of communication from top to bottom (and bottom-up).

Communication constraints in the workplace can look like:

- Unclear instructions or expectations

- Tension or conflict among teams and co-workers

- Industry-specific jargon that may not translate to newer workers

- Language barriers - especially in a global workplace

Barriers between people from other cultures

As its name suggests, intercultural barriers can occur when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds, where even a simple gesture can be misinterpreted.

While in a professional setting, you might have the benefit of preparing for these barriers ahead of time, in a social context these barriers often aren't picked up until it's too late.

Some intercultural communication barriers examples include:

- Words that have different meanings and connotations

- Different body gestures that have different meanings

- Different cultural practices that don't translate

Barriers in family communication

Family communication barriers often stem from emotional baggage or generational gaps that can make daily conversation difficult. Every family shares a different relationship that will affect the way communication is delivered and received. Emotions always play a bigger role in these settings, making them more difficult to navigate. Examples in family relationships can look like:

- Not feeling comfortable in sharing their real thoughts and feelings

- A lack of knowledge or understanding of another's point of view

- Physical barriers like distance

- Technological barriers like a lack of knowledge on how to use instant messaging or even time zone differences

Education and knowledge barriers

There are certain settings that mean a gap in knowledge can cause more issues than a task simply being incomplete. In healthcare settings, the use of medical jargon can create barriers between healthcare providers and patients, leading to potential misunderstandings that could have serious consequences.

Similarly, in educational environments, communication constraints can arise from

different learning styles or linguistic backgrounds, making it challenging for educators to effectively reach every student. Examples can look like:

- A misunderstanding of the correct process for patient care

- Doctors and medical staff having different names for processes depending on the medical setting

- In classrooms, a student may not understand task instructions

It's important to be aware of context with each and every interaction. The ability to pinpoint barriers ahead of time, or recognise them in the moment, allows you to effectively clear any confusion and ensure the right message is both delivered and received.

The impact of technology on communication barriers

In our increasingly digital world, technology plays a very important role when it comes to communication. Video conferencing has made it easier to connect with people across the globe, effectively breaking down geographical barriers. At the same time, translation software can help overcome language obstacles, providing a bridge for clearer understanding.

However, it's worth noting that despite its benefits, technology can also introduce new communication constraints. While video conferencing is a great tool, we lose non-verbal cues like eye contact and body language through the screen. There's also the issue of digital divide, where lack of access to technology can also become a barrier, particularly in educational and healthcare settings.

Bridging the technological gap

One way to bridge this gap is by balancing technology with face-to-face communication. While technology offers convenience and breaks down many traditional barriers, it can't entirely replace face-to-face interactions. In-person communication allows for a better exchange of ideas and is often more effective in resolving conflicts or misunderstandings.

Knowing when to use technology and when to opt for a more personal interaction is key in recognising barriers of communication and how to overcome them.

The impact of technology on communication is complex, offering both solutions

and new challenges. Being mindful of its advantages and limitations can help us navigate this area more effectively.

Communication barriers are diverse, each playing their own role in how we communicate effectively. From the verbal and non-verbal to the written, across personal relationships and professional settings, effective communication is key. Failing to address these barriers can lead to misunderstandings, missed opportunities, and even conflicts.

So now you have the fundamental ideas, you can take proactive steps to improve your communication skills. Whether it's by being more mindful of your non-verbal cues, choosing the appropriate communication channels, or even simply being an active listener, small changes can make a significant impact.

FAQs

What are the most common communication barriers?

The most common barriers include verbal barriers like language differences and the use of jargon, non-verbal barriers such as body language and facial expressions, and written barriers like poor grammar. Emotional and psychological states, as well as cultural and physical factors, can also act as significant barriers to effective communication.

How can communication barriers be overcome in the workplace?

Overcoming barriers in the workplace may involve a few approaches. Open channels of communication, regular team meetings, and feedback sessions can help in breaking down hierarchical barriers. Also, choosing the right communication channels for different types of messages can help reduce misunderstandings.

What are the best strategies for overcoming language barriers in communication?

The best strategies for overcoming language barriers include learning basic phrases or greetings in the other person's language, using translation tools, and choosing for simpler words and sentences. Visual aids like diagrams, charts and even hand gestures can also help in conveying complex ideas. Using an interpreter

is the best option for more complex discussions.

How can emotional barriers be addressed in communication?

Addressing emotional barriers involves practising empathy and active listening. Being aware of your own emotional state and that of the other person can help in navigating emotional barriers. Open and honest communication about how emotions are affecting the conversation can also be beneficial.

How do communication barriers affect personal relationships?

They can have a big impact on personal relationships. Misunderstandings can lead to conflicts, while emotional barriers can create distance. However, overcoming these barriers through open communication, empathy, and active listening can lead to stronger relationships.

What role does active listening play in overcoming communication barriers?

Active listening is important as it involves fully concentrating, understanding, and responding to the other person. This not only shows that you respect what the other person is saying, but also helps you understand their message more accurately.

How does technology impact communication barriers in today's society?

Technology has the potential to break down traditional barriers, like distance and language, through tools such as video conferencing and translation software. However, it can also introduce new barriers. These include the digital divide and the potential for misunderstandings due to the absence of non-verbal cues in digital communication.

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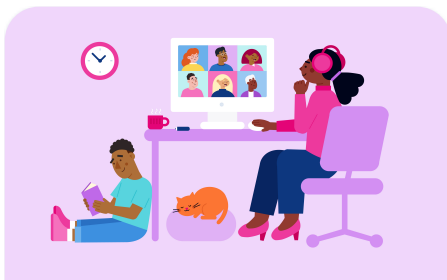|		
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