

( **BERNARD MOSS** )

**COMMUNICATION  
SKILLS IN  
NURSING, HEALTH  
& SOCIAL CARE**

**5<sup>TH</sup> EDITION**

 **SAGE**

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# TELEPHONE, SKYPING AND VIDEO CONFERENCING SKILLS

## TELEPHONE SKILLS

It is difficult to imagine any form of people-work taking place without the use of the telephone. It is a major means of communication between professionals, between agencies and between the professional worker and those with whom they are working. Given the explosion of mobile telephone provision, and its increasing sophistication, it may sound somewhat naive to suggest that people-workers need training in the professional use of this important communication tool. Surely we are all so confident with using telephones that we will adapt effortlessly to their professional usage?

The experience of student and trainee practitioners suggests otherwise. Many find themselves overawed by having to make a professional phone call; they dislike having to use the phone in front of other, more experienced colleagues in the office or on the ward; they can become 'tongue-tied', and they find it difficult to develop a professional approach. And yet a few simple guidelines are all that is needed to get people off to a good start.

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### Activity

Spend some time ringing various organisations, firms, shops and service providers. Compare and contrast the ways in which these first impressions make an impact upon you. Was the welcoming message gabbled at speed, or were you able to take in what was being said? Was it pre-recorded or live? Did you have to select various options before you spoke to a real person? Did you find the message helpful or off-putting? Did their voice seem flat and monotonous, or did it come across in a warm, interesting way?

Now listen to your colleagues at work. How do they come across when they answer the phone? Is there an organisational expectation of the form of words to use when you answer the phone?

What can you learn from this exercise about how you will answer the phone at work when it rings? Write down what you think sounds best, and then try it out to see how it feels.

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There are some obvious differences between face-to-face interviews and telephone conversations, and you need to develop the confidence to get the best out of each.

Your tone of voice can be very revealing: you can convey a lot of information through the careful development of the music of your own telephone voice. If you need any convincing of this, record yourself talking with someone sometime (with their permission) and then listen to the replay. You may be surprised that your voice is not as lively as you had thought. Or listen to the radio and appreciate the ‘voice music’ of words carefully delivered.

### Are you who you say you are?

You will tend to assume that the person ringing you for information is who they say they are, but can you be sure? If you know them well, it is not a problem, but in professional people-work you receive telephone enquiries all the time, and you have a professional responsibility to maintain confidentiality at all times. The Data Protection Act 2018 also lays a responsibility upon you to be extremely careful about what information you divulge about other people over the telephone.

Therefore, if you are not sure, ask for the name of the person who is ringing you, their location and the number for you to ring them back. This gives you time to check. Often, though, it is best to ask them to put their request in writing on official notepaper so that it can be dealt with properly.

Similarly, if you are the one making the call, explain who you are and why you require the information, and invite them to ring you back, giving your number and details. Before you ring, though, ask yourself whether this is information that you could reasonably expect to be given over the phone, or whether you should put the request in writing. How soon do you need this information? This could influence how you request it.

### Silence isn't always golden

In face-to-face interviews, you can often remain silent while the other person talks, because you can give encouragement to them with your facial expression, and some appropriate sounds of encouragement. On the telephone, it does not take much silence for it to become perplexing: the other person soon wonders if you are still there, or whether you have been cut off. This means that you need to be much more verbally active, simply to reassure the person that you are still there and are listening to them. This does not mean you have to use a lot more words – simply a more frequent use of ‘mmm’, ‘yes’, ‘I see’ and so on helps to oil the wheels of a non-visual conversation.

### An ear for detail

How often has an inexperienced worker put the phone down and realised too late that they have not taken down some vital piece of information, even as basic as the phone number and full name of the person they were speaking to. Remember the Activity? It is unlikely that you will have remembered the name of the person who

was introducing themselves to you – the anxiety level of the first few seconds often blocks out these key details. It is very important, therefore, before the call is finished, that you ensure that key information is exchanged, and that you log it accordingly. After all, someone else may need to follow up this information and they will need the details about whom to ring.

### The dreaded answerphone

There is every chance that you will need to leave a message for someone, asking them to ring you back. Again, it is so easy not to give enough details – or to speak so quickly that the person at the other end does not stand a chance of taking down the information accurately. The golden rule is to keep it simple: speak slowly and clearly, say who you are, why you are ringing, give the day/date and time of your call, and the number for them to ring back. Depending on the circumstances, you may also wish to give a few brief details about what it is you wish to discuss with them. But do please remember that another person may pick up the message, thereby compromising confidentiality.

## MOBILE ETIQUETTE

The use of mobile phones as part of professional practice has increased enormously in recent years. There are distinct advantages to this. You can get in touch with your office when necessary, and they can update you quickly in emergencies. Your own personal safety is considerably enhanced if you have a mobile phone you can use. The more technically advanced mobiles also enable you to check your emails and ‘surf the net’ so that you can access information for immediate use in your meeting or with your service user or enquirer. And, of course, the use of text messaging opens up another new world of communication, although the temptation to use texting shorthand spellings should be avoided in formal written communications.

You should be particularly careful about sending personal information to a service user or patient by text messaging. Always check your agency guidelines and gain your manager’s/supervisor’s permission beforehand.

However, there are rules about mobile phone etiquette that are easy to overlook. You should turn them off during meetings and interviews in order to avoid disturbance and interruptions. If you are expecting an urgent call, set it to ‘vibrate’ and explain to the people you are with that you are expecting a call, and apologise in advance for any likely disturbance. It is unlawful to use the mobile phone while driving. And tempting though it may sometimes be, it is not professional to play games on your mobile while sitting at the back of a boring meeting.

One further point deserves consideration. You may find, from time to time, that a service user asks you for your mobile telephone number, or even your home telephone number or personal email address. Usually (but not always) this is because they value your help and support. But you are not their friend, and your personal life and space is separate from your professional life and space. If your agency is

happy for you to give out your work mobile number, then you can give this out *if* you feel it is appropriate and boundaries are established about when they can or cannot ring you. But you should *never* disclose your personal information (or that of any other colleague). You will need to find your own form of words to use to explain this, but it is easiest simply to say: 'I'm sorry – I'm not allowed to give you that number/information – it's against the rules, and I would get into trouble.'

### Emojis and emoticons

There has been an explosion in the use and variety of emojis and emoticons, with text messages sometimes being littered with them. In personal communications these may well be a fun and often lighthearted way of enriching the text, with perhaps no harm done. In professional communications using text messages, however, there is good reason to think carefully about using them. Some workers may well feel that the use of emojis and emoticons softens and perhaps humanises their communication with a wide range of service users, especially young people who might thereby feel the worker was more 'on their wavelength'.

As a worker you always need to think carefully about the implications of the role you are fulfilling, and how professionally to communicate with people in your care. Emojis and emoticons may not always be as clear as you hope; they could be misunderstood; they might even cause offence. They might even undermine your professional relationship. The best advice is therefore to think twice before using them, and if in doubt leave them out.

### Group exercise

With the help of your tutor or supervisor, share together your experiences of using mobile text messages and emojis with your service users or patients. What are the advantages and potential pitfalls of using these forms of communication? Can you think of situations where their use might be helpful? Or situations where you definitely would not use them? Try a Google search to explore various ways in which emojis and emoticons are used to enhance contact with people with communication difficulties.

## SKYPING

The NHS is experimenting with the professional use of Skype for some GP consultations, and other agencies may well begin to explore this medium. The same issues and constraints apply as outlined above, but obviously you will have greater opportunity to engage visually. You need to be clear, however, about your agency guidelines for the use of Skype, and not allow this closer engagement to blur your professional relationships. The skills you need for successful Skyping are similar to those needed for video conferencing (see below).

## VIDEO CONFERENCING – HINTS AND TIPS

The advantages of video conferencing (VC) are self-evident. It can facilitate a wide cross-section of colleagues who need to meet and discuss issues of common concern or interest, without the need to travel long distances. VC can be a very effective use of time, and can enable decisions to be made more quickly in ways that involve all the key people concerned. It is also an important contribution to reducing the carbon footprint of face-to-face meetings.

But as with any interactive form of communication there can be challenges and difficulties that undermine the potential success of the interaction between those involved.

It may seem obvious, but the success or otherwise of a VC event will depend upon the reliability of the technology and the professionalism of everyone involved. If the equipment fails, or is not set up properly so that everyone can be clearly seen and heard, frustration levels will escalate. If the person chairing the VC conference is unable to operate with clear ground rules that give every participant the opportunity to contribute where appropriate, a lack of cohesion will quickly emerge. Careful planning and preparation is the key to a successful VC conference. Please also make sure you are familiar with the technology and what it can and cannot deliver. Some organisations, for example, have sophisticated systems with a ‘mute microphone facility’ to reduce the risk of feedback. And it is good practice to be able to contact the other participants by phone, email or text in case the technology lets you down in any way.

### Etiquette

All the basic ground rules for effective meetings also apply with video conferencing. Being and looking professional matters a lot (sorry – no sloppy T-shirts or inappropriate slogans on display even if you are working at home). Remember to introduce yourself clearly before you speak, especially if it is a large gathering. Anything that detracts from other people’s concentration should be avoided – remember that everything you do will be seen by everyone else. It is easy to forget this, especially if geographically you are in different locations – the camera never lies!

Remember that those ‘at the other end so to speak’ will only see and hear what comes through the camera lens, so do avoid noisy settings, potential interruptions or excessive gesticulating. Remember to speak to the camera when it is your turn to contribute, and not to interrupt other speakers.

If you are chairing the VC, remember to thank people for their participation, and do ensure that everyone knows what has been agreed, how it will be recorded/ minuted and who has responsibility for follow-up actions. Is a further VC needed? If so, plan the date and time together before you all sign off.

Finally, if for whatever reason the VC event did not go well, spend time afterwards identifying what needed to be done differently to ensure that next time it is more successful.

### Group exercise

With the help of your tutor or supervisor, set up a multi-agency VC event for your group. Divide into small groups, with each group taking on a role (e.g. arguing for or against the discharge of a vulnerable adult into inappropriate accommodation). Prepare your arguments and make the VC arrangements using whatever platform works best for you. Run the VC and evaluate the effectiveness of this form of communication. How might it have differed from, say, a telephone conference call?

## FINAL THOUGHTS

It is very easy to allow yourself to be controlled by the telephone, and to feel that you must be available to answer it 24/7. Emails, texts, social media messaging, diary reminders, can swamp your inbox – and that's not taking into account your personal and private stuff. Please try to remember that, in the end, the telephone is there to help you in your professional practice: as your servant, not as a controller. Ideally, you should have a separate phone for your work, but that isn't always possible. But even if you do have a separate one, do remember that there is no such thing as a phone that cannot be switched off. We know this is easy to say and difficult to do, but there is life outside of work!

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING



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**RELATED CONCEPTS** chairing meetings; establishing a professional relationship; information and communication technology (ICT); reflective practice

**ENGAGING WITH THE PCF** context and organisations; skills and interventions; professionalism

**ENGAGING WITH THE NMC CODE** practise effectively; promote professionalism and trust

### Service user snippets

Vibhuti (28), social work student:

‘On my first placement I was in an open-plan office with six other people and I was the only student. Every time I had to make a phone call I was so nervous about being overheard. I thought people would put me down and it began to get to me – I dreaded it ringing! Fortunately my supervisor realised what I was going through, and suggested that I spent a week in her office making and receiving phone calls – that boosted my confidence because she gave me helpful feedback, and after that I was fine.’

Darren (19), social work student:

‘I was so proud of myself on placement for setting up a video conferencing meeting with various professionals up and down the country. But the signal failed and I had left all the contact details for everyone back in my office. I was so embarrassed! But people came to my rescue and eventually it worked a treat. But never discount gremlins!’