

RESHAPING NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN A BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT RULED BY VIRTUAL MEETINGS

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Abstract

Depending on the context, some people can send mixed messages when it comes to nonverbal communication. For this reason, it is important to understand nonverbal communication and our own errors or limitations.

Think about a recent conversation you had where you felt it was important to get your point across. Was the response you received the way you wanted it to be? The response is often a reflection of the message you sent. Nonverbal behaviors can mirror each other and reveal the relationship between two people.

Nonverbal elements are a part of us, a subtle representation of our thoughts and emotions. And yet, most people have no idea what it conveys. We are so focused on choosing the right words that we forget what message our body is sending.

In this article, we aim to explore the psychological and communicative issues caused by virtual nonverbal deficits and how users can adapt to maintain connection and mutual understanding online.

Key words: nonverbal communication, virtual meetings, negotiation, technology

JEL Classification: D91, D74, M10

Discussion

Communication can be considered a fundamental characteristic of human existence. All managerial functions are carried out with the help of communication, as a process of understanding between people through the transfer of information.

In business contexts, for instance during the negotiation process, a person sends and receives messages, sends stimuli and collects responses. The messages sent or received can be verbal, paraverbal or non-verbal and must be deciphered as best as possible by the negotiators.

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We can communicate using languages, symbols and signs, which can be verbal and non-verbal. We communicate non-verbally even by our simple presence (how we look) or through the things around us (how we choose or arrange them). We communicate in this way without wanting to and without realizing it. It is practically impossible to block non-verbal communication, as we can with verbal communication.

In the 60's, two researchers, A. Mehrabian and M. Weiner (1967) [1] found that the proportion in which we use verbal language and nonverbal languages is, in oral communication, the following:

- ✓ 7% words
- ✓ 38% paralanguage (mainly intonation and voice inflections)
- ✓ 55% of other elements of nonverbal language (mainly facial expression, gestures and body posture).

Even it is considered controversial, because, among others, their study included only women, it is still quoted on a large scale in the academic environment. Extraordinary communicators deliberately use nonverbal cues and paralanguage because they know they can make a difference in how they are perceived by others.

Nonverbal communication can support, contradict or substitute verbal communication, regulate and control it (for example, through gestures that symbolize the desire to take over the conversation, approval/disapproval, encouraging the interlocutor to speak, etc.). The nonverbal message is closest to the reality of the sender and is the one to which the interlocutor pays the most attention.

There are several types of nonverbal communication. One type is sensory nonverbal communication, which is based on what we receive through the senses of sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste. Another type is aesthetic nonverbal communication (painting, music, dance, image, etc.), which takes place through different forms of artistic expression and communicates different artistic emotions. Another nonverbal communication is based on the use of insignia (flags, badges, uniforms, etc.) and specific symbols such as, for example, those related to religion (cross, altar, icons, etc.) or social status (officer ranks, decorations, titles, etc.). Interpreting nonverbal language is often challenging and several aspects must be considered. To avoid misinterpretation of a nonverbal element, it must be analyzed in the context of all other verbal and nonverbal elements that accompany the message. Also, a correct interpretation requires considering factors such as the individual's personality, level of education, life experience and other relevant personal characteristics. In addition, the way nonverbal language is used and interpreted differs significantly not only from one person to another, but also from one profession to another, from one community to another and from one culture to another, which requires caution and flexibility in their analysis.

To improve our ability to communicate through nonverbal languages, we must first become aware of how we ourselves use and interpret these languages and their impact on those around us.

We all use gestures, but sometimes we're not very good at matching our gestures to what we have to say. Intentional gestures support the message and keep the listener's attention.

According to S. Sayler (2011) [2], gestures add a kind of visual momentum, which is often useful so that you don't have to repeat yourself. For example, a curious side effect of counting nonverbally is that the audience will remember which finger refers to the sales report and which to the budget review. Often listeners will use the exact same fingers when delivering the message.

Sociometric research shows that humans subconsciously assess hierarchy within seconds because high status individuals exhibit distinct nonverbal patterns.

High-power individuals tend to adopt relaxed, slightly asymmetrical postures, while low-power individuals tend to make themselves smaller and more symmetrical (for example tightly folded hands or feet glued together)

Mirroring is formally known as behavioral synchrony, as when two people are aligned or like each other, they subconsciously match each other's posture, gestures and speech rates. But this process must happen naturally, don't try to imitate someone, the response will be one of distrust. Instead, try to match their energy level and posture within 15-30 seconds, to create a sense of shared goals.

Often a group of people make a joint decision that the group members, as individuals, would consider unacceptable, but is not a decision that anyone individually wanted.

Thus, each member of the group makes the decision that they believe the others want, giving up the decision that they would have made individually - the result being that the group decides to do something that no one actually wanted to do, but something that seemed to please the other members of the group.

This phenomenon occurs in any type of group, whether it is a formal group (committee, council, etc.), or whether it is an informal group, a group of friends or family members.

Thus, the group accepts decisions that members would not make individually, because each of the group members believes that they can evade responsibility, which falls on the group, not on an individual level.

Moreover, no one really feels solidarity with the decision made, respectively no one is willing to assume the consequences of the decision made in the group.

It usually appears because of an internal communication problem in the group, with each member refraining from presenting and supporting their own opinion because they believe it would be averse to the wishes of the other members and do not want to be making a discordant note or opposing the general good.

A classic example of mirroring is the Abilene Paradox, defined in 1974 by Jerry B. Harvey, an American management professor, and is considered the cause of very bad group

decision-making in certain situations, due to the conformism and desire for group membership of its members.

But today's reality is much different from that of 10 years ago, the widespread use of technology has brought a new complexity to the communication process. Shifting nonverbal communication from physical boardrooms to digital spaces introduces significant friction. In a virtual interaction, our brains work much harder to process human connection due to fatigue and data deprivation. In his work, *The Art of Public Speaking*, Stephan E. Lucas claims that on average, a person speaks at a rate of 120-150 words per minute, but the brain can process between 400-800 words in the same minute, which means that the process of listening and observing is more tiring than the process of speaking.

When we move meetings to a screen, the information stream gets compressed, chopped up, and distorted. This friction is a primary driver behind “zoom fatigue”, because our brains must work twice as hard to decode what used to be subconscious information [3].

It is difficult to look someone in the eyes and look at your camera at the same time and is hard to read their facial reactions. In face-to-face conversations, typical response pauses are a mere 200 milliseconds, while video conferencing tools introduce tiny audio and video delays (vary from 300 to 700 milliseconds). Such delays make us perceive the speaker as less friendly, less focused and more anxious.

Also, it's an intimacy paradox because we place our faces much closer than we would normally stand in an office, and that can trigger a fight or flight response in some people, as it is perceived as forced intimacy. For many people it is stress caused by the need to be groomed, to wear make-up, to look nicer, almost like TV presenters.

Software platforms introduced beauty filters that smooth out skin and adjust low light. Our aesthetic became subtly airbrushed in real time. However, we must be careful in using some functionalities. Too much filter sends a message of superficiality and frivolity, we do not focus on important things such as preparing the communication, but rather on superficial aspects.

Personal appearance communicates through body shape of clothing, smell (aroma, flavor), jewelry and other accessories.

By what we communicate, based on certain attitudes and preconceptions that we have, body shape (tall, thin, thin wrists, reduced muscle mass, fat free, short, athletic, broad shoulders, muscles well represented, nonfat) is an important element to be realized in the evaluation made by others.

A person who looks good is automatically associated with a person having social success. Clothing reflects the personality of the individual, is a kind of extension of the self, and in this context, communicates information about it.

It can even affect our general behavior or of others. Clothing can also be used to create a role or social status real or pretended.

For business meetings and negotiations, the clothing should be simple, elegant and of good quality. But the traditional corporate dressing changed quickly after 2020, the traditional suits and crisp looks were replaced by a new philosophy: business on the top, pajamas on the bottom.

And once this happened, even the office aesthetic changed towards more comfortable clothing, less structured, minimalist. But few people understand that this aesthetic is part of nonverbal communication, and the way we dress sends a message.

Of course, for some, seeing a CEO in a hoodie having a video call from his house democratized the workplace. In their eyes, the person became more relaxed, empathetic and vastly more human.

But this image is misleading, because in face-to-face meetings, negotiations or conferences, these CEOs return to tailored-made suits, nonverbally they want to convey a message of power.

We communicate a lot through body movements and gestures, and in a video conference we are reduced to “talking heads”. This leaves teams operating with a massive deficit in emotional context, at a time when more companies are reducing their travel expenses and conducting negotiations online.

Nonverbal element	Face to face meeting	Online meeting
Eye contact	Looking directly at the person’s face, and adapting your gaze to context	The 70/30 rule: look at the camera 70% of the time when speaking, and at the screen 30% of the time to read reactions.
Gestures	Free movement, gestures naturally visible, without exaggerating.	Position your camera so your shoulders and hands are visible. Keep gestures within the lower third of the camera frame.
Active listening	Head nods, subtle vocal cues.	Use slightly larger nods and visible facial expressions, micro-expressions get lost in low video resolution.

Posture	Natural sitting or standing	Lean slightly towards the camera to show more engagement, while slouching backward makes you look detached.
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Table 1. How to adapt your nonverbal communication to online business meetings

Source: adapted from Webb, M., Zoom fatigue and how to prevent it, PMC, 2023

These changes in communication have brought both good points for business negotiations, but also less favorable aspects. From our personal experience we can say negotiations are more fragmented today. Someone can have a video conference to negotiate a contract, and at the same time team members message each other privately on WhatsApp to coordinate counter offers.

This way of approaching negotiation does not lead to immediate decisions; it is a sequential approach to some problems. Between these video conferences, a series of summarizing and clarifying emails are exchanged. Negotiations take longer and give partners time to change their minds, what we don't always want from our partner or in critical situations for our company.

These pauses can have a positive effect as well, because we are not forced into concessions immediately, we have time to simulate scenarios, to consult with experts from our company, and it reduces the emotional pressure.

Table 2. Traditional negotiations versus virtual negotiations

Analyzed factor	Traditional negotiations	Virtual negotiations
Nonverbal communication	Full body language, a connection can be created, less communication errors.	Limited to head and shoulders, artificial contact, hard to read the room.
Logistics & costs	Can be expensive and tiring, and you work on a strict schedule.	Zero travel costs and highly adaptable but depends on the time zone and company rules regarding technologies.
Team coordination	Rely on subtle physical cues and eye contact. The preparation of the process is key. Based on empathy and emotional intelligence.	You can use private channels to text and align with the team. There may be more communication blunders.

		Less empathy and real connection.
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Source: adapted from The Harvard Negotiation Project & Program on Negotiation research on “E-Negotiation”

Online or offline, communication can have many barriers, and especially nonverbal communication.

Very common in both mediums are the lack of attention, distraction of the receiver or irrelevance of the subject for it. For example, since the advent of mobile phones, especially smartphones, we are very distracted from communication. This distraction may be interpreted by the partner as a lack of respect or interest.

When we fail to provide nonverbal feedback, the speaker’s brain interprets it as rejection. Also, research in social psychology shows that consistent lack of attention reduces the speaker’s cognitive clarity, losing their train of thought [4].

Active listening is a skill that can be acquired and developed through practice. This skill can be difficult to master and will therefore take time and patience. Active listening involves listening with all your senses. In addition to paying close attention to the speaker, it is important that the "active listener" is also "seen" as listening - otherwise, the speaker may conclude that what they are saying is uninteresting to the listener. By providing this feedback, the speaker will feel more at ease and will therefore communicate more easily, openly and honestly. There are both verbal and non-verbal cues associated with active listening.

Non-verbal cues include smiling (if appropriate), direct eye contact, nodding at appropriate times and avoiding any distractions. These nonverbal cues convey the message that the other person is interested in what the speaker has to say and that their attention is fully engaged.

Giving verbal cues of active listening can also be helpful. Reflecting on what the speaker has said by asking a clarifying question can be one such cue. Paraphrasing involves finding slightly different words to restate the speaker’s main idea and is also a great way to show active listening.

The language barrier plays a very important role in virtual meetings, because we tend to speak more than in face-to-face meetings, and we are more limited in gestures that can help us understand the message.

So, platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom or Google Meet have implemented translation features that reduce the language barriers.

We have experienced in many virtual meetings that some teammates hold back and don't feel comfortable because they are not native speakers of English, for example.

This functionality also reduced costs, because now companies don't have to pay an interpreter or hire people that are bilingual or speak several languages.

Also, besides live translation, such platforms generate translated meeting transcripts and summaries, and participants can review it and analyze it later.

Another important barrier lies in cultural differences. The rules of social interaction vary greatly in different cultures, as does the expression of emotions.

Despite our digital savvy urban population and robust information technology sector, we would say that face to face communication remains an important mechanism for trust verification in the Romanian culture. Critical business milestones such as introductions, joint ventures or complex contracts are overwhelmingly conducted in person.

All these cultural differences extend to gestures, eye contact, even proxemics, or attitude towards time. Even during virtual meetings, we can observe different screen etiquette, camera behavior or verbal pacing.

In high-context cultures, having your camera on is essential, it builds trust and shows care for details and respect.

Also, many people observe the background of your screen and give meaning to it. A cluttered background can unintentionally signal disorganized thinking, while a sterile or blurred background can feel distant and impersonal. It is very important to adapt your background depending on the interlocutor, the stakes of the discussion, and preferably, important meetings should take place from the office, for a more professional and business-oriented image.

In some other cultures, low-context or very private, if the meetings are not high-level or a visual presentation is explicitly required, team members prefer to keep cameras off to protect their private space [5].

Many confusions can appear in virtual meetings because of cultural differences. For example, we experienced situations with Western partners that interpreted silence as a technical glitch, and not as a period for reflection.

We have also experienced situations where partners don't understand pauses and face expressions and end up talking over each other. And sometimes platforms like Zoom or Teams have audio algorithms that cut off one speaker when another speaks, creating a disruptive technical clash.

In our opinion, companies need to start simulating these online meetings, especially the high-stakes ones, just like face-to-face meetings, to avoid overlapping situations within their own team or technical problems.

At the same time, companies are already implementing online codes of conduct, safety measures regarding the technologies used or banning AI in these meetings. Also, for longer virtual meetings, sending the agenda is still a must, to prioritize topics to discuss and be time conscious.

Regardless of culture, many people tend to perform rather than communicate naturally, as seeing your own reflection so often causes hyper self-awareness. This problem can be solved by hiding their own self-view, you can only see the others and focus on them.

Another very important aspect that produced a total shift from traditional negotiations and communication norms are the proprietary selling and bidding platforms that eliminate human to human negotiations.

Driven by advancements in artificial intelligence, machine learning, and game theory, companies are transitioning from traditional communication and back-and-forth discussions to zero negotiation or autonomous negotiation models.

Such platforms operate under the “take it or leave it” business model. Buyers or sellers post a specific requirement alongside a calculated, data-driven price. Using AI powered matching features, qualified business partners can click “match” or “accept” to lock the contract.

Companies like Walmart or Maersk use AI platforms that use chatbots and automated agents that negotiate with thousands of suppliers at the same time. Clearly, the companies pre-set parameters like payment terms, quantity, discounts, delivery dates. It is a modern version of the traditional negotiation mandate.

Table 3. Advantages and disadvantages of algorithmic platforms in negotiations

Advantages	Disadvantages
You can cover more negotiations at the same time and optimize results by being data oriented.	Some businesses are resistant to algorithmic platforms, feeling squeezed by rigid parameters or alienated by the lack of human communication.
Reduce the negotiation time to minutes and give professionals time to focus on high-stakes negotiations and strategic relationships.	Automated bidding can turn transactions into rigid, price only battles. Even the most sophisticated technologies can have errors or misinterpretations of contractual clauses.
Algorithmic bidding eliminates human emotion, bias and fatigue from the process.	Removing human dialogue reduces collaborative problem-solving, where

	buyers and sellers find mutual value beyond just price.
Seamless ERP integration, as once the bid is accepted, the system automatically generates purchase orders, contracts, and syncs with enterprise resource planning systems.	Algorithmic platforms don't have contextual awareness of people, for example geopolitical changes, natural disasters, labor strikes, etc.

Source: adapted from Nibble Technology Whitepaper, The State of Autonomous Negotiation in Procurement, 2026

Resistance to change remains one of the most significant barriers to successful technology adoption in business communication. We shouldn't label those employees as old-fashioned or stubborn, because the root causes are deeply human.

For example, during pandemic, we all have become competent in Teams, Zoom, Google Meet and other platforms. But technology evolves very quickly, and we were saying that even these platforms added more functionalities, and this transforms us into novices again, the feeling of not knowing frustrates us.

During the pandemic, and even today, many employees mentioned to us that these modern communication tools feel like a "digital leash", because they have active statuses and tracking metrics, you need to stay "online". This is a very important aspect, because if the communicators have personal concerns and are stressed, they may be consumed by these personal concerns and will not be receptive to the message being conveyed. The psychological state of the business partners will influence how the message is received.

Maybe a potential solution to reduce the resistance to change would be, instead of training modules, implementation guides, and digital transformation managers, to work on the informal implementation. What we mean by informal implementation is using peer-to-peer learning, as employees are more comfortable asking a colleague about a new app than asking a manager. Every organization has early adopters of different apps and technologies; they naturally are inclined to use it. So, they can be empowered to promote it among colleagues in a subtle and gradual way.

Regardless of the means of communication, virtual or face to face, we suggest the message must be calibrated to the specifics of the audience, and easy-to-understand language is the best solution. Excessive use of specific terminology and professional jargon should be avoided. People are often intimidated by specialized language and are afraid to admit that they do not understand the message being delivered. The speaker can make a few deliberate pauses in the presentation to ask questions to ensure that the message is understood as intended. It will also allow the listener to ask clarifying questions.

Also, even though feedback given to the interlocutor may occasionally be negative, it is important that it be constructive in nature. Providing feedback helps to enhance the speaker's skills. This will strengthen interpersonal relationships and future communications.

Conclusions

Although technology has made the world smaller, enabling companies to be connected more easily and at any time, in many ways has made our cultural and communication differences more visible.

Virtual meetings on platforms such as Teams, Zoom or Webex, are stripping away subtle gestures, side glances, and ambient room energy.

Sometimes the communication seems very blunt, pauses feel longer and awkward and interruptions are more aggressive.

The transition to virtual meetings favored more low-context communicators, that are direct and explicit. In our opinion, companies must create virtual spaces/tools that allow less direct communicators to engage more.

Even the usage of communication platforms is different depending on geography. In North America and Europe, we use extensively Teams, Slack, Webex, WhatsApp for business negotiations, client management or daily updates on projects. But in China, for example, they use more WeChat and WeChat Work, and they don't easily accept meetings on other platforms.

We tend to replace nonverbal communication with emojis in these online meetings, a phenomenon increasingly common among young professionals. But this approach can be misunderstood and viewed as unprofessional by partners from other countries, superiors, and more experienced colleagues.

We believe that we are still in a transitional or dualistic period, in which we must learn the secrets of nonverbal communication and subsequently adapt them to the specifics of virtual meeting.

For many companies, the way they negotiate reflects their brand values. If a company treats its partners as commodities squeezed by an algorithm, it may find it difficult to attract premium partners who want to work with collaborative, face to face communicators.

Also, by offloading negotiations to software, companies risk losing their internal talent, those skilled negotiators that can solve high-stakes negotiations.

Over the past few years, we have encountered many situations where partners we had collaborated with online, when they met us face to face, had reactions like "you're shorter than I imagined" or "you have a much firmer handshake than I imagined". These show us that for many business individuals, direct relationships are important.

Clearly is hard to signal warmth in virtual meetings, but it is not impossible. For example, when comes into a call, they should offer a genuine smile, this signals warmth and builds psychological safety. It should draw people into the conversation and make them feel seen and valued.

Depending on the goal of the meeting, colors can be used to project competence and warmth. For example, deep blues and navies are regarded as the trust colors, the person using them can, in this way, project reliability, professionalism and calm competence.

On the technical side, solid white reflects too much light, often blinding the camera lens and your face ends up in shadow. Tight stripes or busy patterns create a dizzying visual glitch on video. It looks like your clothes are vibrating or shimmering.

The most important rule of virtual wardrobe charisma is contrast. Aim to be a distinct shape against your background so that your physical movement and expressions remain clear.

A distinctive feature of face-to-face business meetings is the integration of socialization into professional frameworks. Those meetings transition from formal boardrooms to informal settings, like business lunches or dinners. These informal meetings allow business partners or even teammates to establish personal rapport, which builds long term business relationships. Also, in this relaxed environment more accurate data can be collected on people's nonverbal communication skills. Beyond what is said, the energy and charisma exuded play a significant role. Important decisions are still made considering the human factor.

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