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Official WhatsApp groups - a communication burnout

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I am pretty confident that most of you have experienced this challenge in your work life where as a university faculty with some amalgam of administrative assignments, you are being nominated as a member of a committee with certain terms of reference. The moment the committee notification is circulated, you receive a WhatsApp message by the Convener or the Secretary stating “Mr. XYZ has added you to the WhatsApp group for the committee members”; nonetheless every member of the committee is easily and readily accessible at your campus. Having yourself added to another workplace-based WhatsApp group is none less than a can of worms for many but feeling the weight of a social obligation, most of us still remain in few of the groups especially when your boss is also one of the members. Slinking out of these groups without being noticed in WhatsApp chats is still taken as “rude” or “insulting” if any of the the members see your name in the list of “past participants.”

Having launched officially its counterpart, WhatsApp Business, in January 2018, WhatsApp has over 2 billion active users worldwide by the end of year 2022. It is ranked as the most used mobile Messenger app in the world with more than 100 billion messages are sent each day.¹ The drive towards adopting modern ways of communication is nothing but a blessing in terms of quick, easy and valuable correspondence amongst professionals especially if they are working remotely. The provision of a simple instant messaging platform called WhatsApp is a highly popular channel; yet to be perfected to prevent it from becoming piercing and chaotic for most of the employees in an organization. Juggling multiple group chats, no user management, and 24/7 unrelated texts by the colleagues has made managing workplace communications through WhatsApp a nightmare.

For a person like me, keeping the inbox zero is like having my head in the cloud; as impracticable as mastering the art of making a round *chapati* for meals. Just as it would be unprofessional to leave a meeting or networking event without some kind of a goodbye, it wouldn't be right to treat a professional discussion in the same way. In addition, WhatsApp does not provide the opportunity to log-in or out of the discussions on users' choice, therefore one has to bear the burden of either forcefully reading those tons of messages or ignore most of the clutter by muting till you are informed by your sincere colleagues on a personal inbox that your boss is quite active in the group and you being one of the senior employees should at least “see” the messages to let him understand that you are in the loop. An extra effort in this regard can definitely be made by blindly hitting the “thumbs up” emoticon on all the messages added by your boss to the discussion thread. Another gruesome phenomenon is the continuous and incessant messages on weekends by the colleagues or getting reminded by the seniors of something unforeseen that one needs to do instantly but it is impossible at the moment: either going through a document, a thesis, a report or an email, etc. because you are enjoying your free time or are currently going somewhere with your family, puts too much pressure on an employee. The thought of being available 24/7 is overwhelming and makes one feels like a work machine. A research carried out by Guild² found that while 38% of professionals use WhatsApp worldwide for work purposes, a rather 78% of these users are overwhelming and want an alternative with better privacy options.

Using personal WhatsApp for official use also tends to mix all the conversations in one platform which can create confusion in simultaneous communications between the

personal and professional contacts. When this happens, work-related information can accidentally be sent to your contacts in personal life or vice versa. At the same time, the mix of personal and professional conversations can serve as a distraction to the workday as social and work life blends together. Texting to your kids at home about taking a good shower while on the other side you are discussing the agenda for tomorrow's faculty meeting with your colleagues makes it hard to focus on your work meticulously.

It may be presumed that WhatsApp groups and business communications are considered as an ideal hub for people at remote places to come together and have conversations that may spark new ideas or products and other business improvements. But using this medium of correspondence requires you to respond quickly rather very quickly at many times otherwise your continuity and point of view is lost in the flow, particularly with fast-moving conversations by the other members. High-quality thoughts take time to evolve but forcibly giving quick and rapid-fire responses often compromise the quality of the ideas that are shared. As group conversations tend to build up and up rather than starting afresh, a feeling that an issue has been definitively solved becomes out of question. All this confusion ultimately leads to unclear, disjointed, and disconnected workplace communication. In the end, WhatsApp hurts productivity more than it helps. In addition, this pressure to respond quickly and to be succinct, to be ingenious, to impress, to take the lead - all this is a source of stress and anxiety for the messaging addicts. Selection of the group participants, senior and serious ones, is a key to success in such cases.

Unfortunately, a number of poor practices have also arisen. Most of the times adding non-serious or irrelevant members may create a nuisance by initiating any unrelated hot topic which can dominate the space and take over the attention of most of the members thus leading to an ineffective outcome and waste of time. Further many employees may use it for self-promotion, boasting their personal or professional achievements thus having a feeling of satisfaction. Another very annoying issue with chat groups, not only on WhatsApp, is that there will always be at least two persons (attention seekers) who will converse like they are in a private group. Additionally, knee-jerk instant reactions while chatting with the risk of giving instant criticism or sharing an instant negative opinion, where everyone on the group gets a chance to see that, is also a major source of informalizing the official contents and contexts. Unfortunately, some of the members may use the platform for bullying to the extent of harassment that could be liable to civil or criminal complaints under the

existing law. A controversial case at the Industrial Court of Malaysia where an employee was dismissed for quitting the mobile company's WhatsApp group without her superior's permission has not only blemished the fundamental privacy rights of employees but also warrants a careful and cautious use of business WhatsApp communications.³ Failure of group Admin to monitor or keep a check on all these bugging issues is a major stumbling block for a rising number of cons associated with these modern communication tools.

Nowadays, trying to limit oneself with being available only per email where the colleagues do not have an opportunity of a "'Seen'-notification' is a massive relief for anyone who needs a focused workplace routine with no compulsion to reply instantaneously nevertheless his/her colleagues may despise this idea as being "ignored."

Having said this, I still do initiate WhatsApp groups but try to restrict them only to the short term but urgent projects or discussions where teamwork and early action is inevitable. Ease of access with effective and timely follow ups in such cases ensure the logical and fruitful conclusion. Before creating any official WhatsApp group, every employer should weigh the options and see whether the benefits outweigh the demerits. Every employee has a fundamental right to separate his/her off time from the work time. Employers should understand certain justifiable boundaries when it comes to communicating with their employees after working hours. It is important for all the employees to cool down and regenerate their lost energy after the off time or at the weekends where they also get a bracing time to process their experiences from the past week. Nonetheless it is also pivotal for maintaining a good physical and mental health of the employees that will in turn boost their productivity and efficiency.

Conflict of interest

None to declare.

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