

Intro:

Hello, and welcome to the CPA Australia Podcast, your weekly source for accounting education and career and leadership discussion.

Jackie Blondell:

Erica Dhawan is a 21st century collaboration expert who has studied collaboration and human innovation for more than 15 years. As a research fellow at Harvard, then MIT, she taught leadership and collaboration. Her first book, *Getting Big Things Done* has become a bestseller and she's since written her second book, *Digital Body Language* and address global leaders at the World Economic Forum and has become a sought-after keynote speaker. She will be giving a keynote address at CPA Australia's Virtual Congress in October. Welcome, Erica.

Erica Dhawan:

Thank you for having me.

Jackie Blondell:

It's lovely to have you today. Let's talk about the past year, we can't really avoid it. You've been doing collaboration work for 15 years. How has the last year of remote work created a more, as you say, cues` workplace culture, and why do you believe we're all facing a crisis of miscommunication at work?

Erica Dhawan:

Research shows that roughly 60 to 80% of our face-to-face communication is our non-verbal body language, pacing, pauses, gestures, tone. Now, when we can't physically see each other it's easy to feel like all of that context has just disappeared. Messages are more confusing, small things like how many minutes it took for someone to answer our text can take on an outsized meaning. And all of this is because we can't see the cues that we're used to that tell us what a person really means by their words and actions.

But the truth is in a world of remote work, body language hasn't disappeared, it has transformed. We now infuse what I call digital body language, the new signals and cues that make or break trust, empathy, and respect in our digital age. The problem is many of us are doing it blindly, accidentally, or just plain wrong. I recently ran a study with thousands of office workers and found that on average employees are wasting up to four hours per week on miscommunication, poor, unclear, or confusing digital communication.

Now, the rapid increase in the digital nature of our workplace has just changed the dynamics of traditional office politics. A brief message can turn into a seemingly passive aggressive message. Power plays can show up in emails and even video call dynamics. The ambiguity of a message can play out in a much more confusing, reducing cross-functional collaboration, and even simple things as time zone differences from behind a screen can create more disconnection than we would have hoped.

Jackie Blondell:

Can you, if you've got some examples, I know you've mentioned that you've seen colleagues do create the sort of times types of miscommunication with things like chat and email, can you give us an example of how that miscommunication works?

Erica Dhawan:

I'll give you a few examples, both from my own life and from many stories, from leaders and teams that I've worked with. For example, one chief marketing officer I know was on a Zoom call recently giving some feedback to her team about a deck they were preparing for her. She said something of the likes of, "Let's iterate on this a bit more." But what she really meant was, "Let's add two more bullet points."

However, she didn't say that. Her team took her brief mention as a work directive. They spent 40 hours on 10 new slides. Now, imagine how de-motivated they felt when it turned into two bullet points. And one of the key lessons here is that brevity can create a lot of confusion. The carefulness in our words, in our tone, in our language, carries more weight with a lack of an ability to read the furrowed brows or the pursed lips or the lack of eye contact in a face-to-face conversation.

I'll share one more story. Many leaders have shared different versions of this, but this is an example where a client of mine sent me a message saying, "We need to talk about the budget." And it was a project that I had been working on for a long time. When I got this message I thought that that meant they wouldn't be able to pay for the work that I had spent hours and hours and days working on.

What ended up happening is I didn't sleep much of the night. I was quite anxious, there was a high power dynamic between me and this other person, and then the next day when I got on the phone with my client they just said, "I forgot what the budget was, can you remind me?" It was really just a simple discussion to try to get clarity. But I think these are just simple examples to show that the ambiguity in our digital messages and the loss of those nonverbal cues can make sometimes seemingly trivial responses seem alarming.

Jackie Blondell:

Great. We'll talk about the different types of how people approach digital body language, but can I first ask you, what should this client have said in his email to you instead?

Erica Dhawan:

Yeah. I think I'll first start with how I should have responded instead, and then we can talk about the client. But we don't always have the influence, especially if there's a higher power dynamic from the other person, so first let me share what I think I should have done. The first thing I should have done is not get emotionally hijacked by a cut short message, staying in the place of reason, not reacting and assuming good intent is important. And sometimes we have no idea where other people are. They might be on a plane sending a quick message to someone versus having a lot of time to really give colour. I could have assumed better intent in instead of rushing to judge judgement .

Now, on the other end, if you're someone in a higher power dynamic, like in the case of this client, there are certain things that you can do to be a bit more careful. The first thing is just to take a second... I like to call it think before you type. Ask yourself, "Am I giving the recipient what they need to clarify why I want to chat?" And so maybe instead of saying, "We need to talk about the budget," maybe they could say, "I have a quick question for you. Can I give you a quick call, nothing urgent?"

Or if they send that question by email they can clarify with a bit more detail what specifically they were looking for versus just the shorthand that created more miscommunication. At the end of the day, sometimes this may not happen. We'll get messages that will be confusing. I think the really job is on each and every one of us to assume that good intent while at the same time having the empathy to be careful when we're sending off messages.

Jackie Blondell:

I think assuming good intent is a good guide. Sometimes that's really hard to do but I think that's a great point. But let's talk about... You talk about there are different types of people in terms of how they use digital body language. Do you call them the digital natives or... And then there's digital adapters who are trying to catch up? Can you explain a few of these different types of responses to digital body language?

Erica Dhawan:

In my research I looked at where were some of the differences in how we digitally communicate across genders, cultures, and even generations. And particularly in my research on generations what I found was first and foremost we are not all the same, even within a generation. Millennials are not all the same, baby boomers are not all the same, but what I did find was that there are different digital body language styles. On one end there are those that I call digital body language natives. These are individuals that are really thriving in the environments of remote work. They love text, IM, they love the short hand tools. They hate voicemails. They hate phone calls out of the blue. They really thrive in the use of technology to share collective input. We've seen many organisations that have become remote first workforces and they're often filled with many digital natives.

On the other end of the spectrum are those that I call digital body language adapters. These are individuals that feel more like immigrants to the world of remote work, they can't wait to get to the office. They really prefer that quick phone call versus endless chats and emails. They tend to use more formal language and punctuation. One quick tip is if a digital native puts a period at the end of a text they may more likely be using that to show frustration or passive aggressiveness. Whereas if a digital adapter puts a period at the end of a text they are just implying good grammar and punctuation.

One of the things we have to remember is that we are not all the same. Similar to different traditional body language styles we have different digital body language styles. If a digital native sends a thoughtful email with questions for an adapter and the adapter says, "Let's get on the phone," or in a meeting to discuss and the native feels, why can't that adapter just answer my emails so I can get back to work? The adapter is feeling why can't this colleague just pick up the phone so I can get back to work? Again, by assuming good intent, checking our bias and remembering that we are not all the same, we can be more inclusive to some of these different styles at work.

Jackie Blondell:

Does our actual body... I just want to explore the idea the similarities and differences between our actual body language and our digital body language. Are there any correlations between the two or are these two separate things?

Erica Dhawan:

What I would say is that we have transferred certain signals and cues that we use in traditional body language into different mediums and formats in digital body language. And it often varies based on the channel, what we may use to signal trust. An email may look different in a video call or in a chat message. Let me give you some examples. For example, if we want to signal trust to someone else, in traditional body language we may keep our palms open and cross our arms and legs or smile a lot. In digital body language we may do simple things in emails like use language that is clear and direct with clear subject lines, have a friendly gesture at the end of an email saying, "Thank you so much," or, "Hope this helps," with an exclamation point. We may mirror the sender's use of an emoji or maybe shorthand like LOL or a smiley face, depending on the engagement that we have with that individual.

Now, let's move to another example. Let's imagine we're trying to show excitement. In traditional body language we may show excitement by speaking quickly, by raising our voice, expressing

ourself physically, or even tapping our fingers. In digital body language that may show up in multiple exclamation points or even capitalization in text, email, and IM. It could also be signalled through quick response times or even sending multiple messages in a row. So sending an email, a text in, and IM at the same time to show that level of excitement.

And last but not least another one is urgency. If we want to signal urgency in traditional body language we may raise our voice, point our finger. In digital body language the all caps function is often used to signal urgency in written formats. In other formats we may opt for a phone call instead of a written message to show urgency, and also we may do simple things in emails like skip greetings and just get to the point very quickly in our messages. Those are just some examples of how traditional body language has translated into digital body language. As you can see it's not all the same and it often varies based on the format and the channel.

Jackie Blondell:

Oh, okay. Well, I've got to be watching my periods, okay, full stops in future. I'm quite worried. We're going to take a short break now, Erica. And when we return we'll be asking Erica about trust. She's brought this up because we want to know how you foster deeper trust when everyone's remote. But we'll be back soon.

Announcer:

We hope you're enjoying the CPA Australia Podcast so far. As business and finance rapidly transforms, so does leadership to drive recovery, adaptability, and growth. From the 20th to the 22nd of October, join the global CPA Australia community at Virtual Congress to discover how you can play a significant role in a time of change. For more information, go to the link in the podcast show notes page.

Jackie Blondell:

Welcome back listeners. Now, we're talking with Erica Dhawan about digital body language, the different types, how you can adapt and how you must perhaps always present with a positive outlook to communication you may get and how you shouldn't anticipate bad things will happen. But now we want to talk about trust because, Erica, you brought that up just before our break. I want to look at how you foster deeper trust when the workforce is working from home. I'm just going to give you some context for us in Australia. We're going through another wave of Delta. Our two largest cities are in some of the strictest lockdowns that have been experienced in the world since the pandemic began, so quite a lot of our workforces are working remotely now. Let's talk about trust, how do you foster it?

Erica Dhawan:

At the end of the day I first want to acknowledge that this is a hard time. Many of us are in situations we never would have imagined, we hoped that we'd be back in the office at this point. And so building trust in many ways is easier because we're all in this together navigating these hard times and it's also harder at the same time. I think really starting off, what does trust mean when we're leading a workforce? I like to say that trust is when we have an open team culture where everyone knows they are listened to, where everyone can always ask one another for help, and where everyone can grant favours, where returns may or may not be immediate and there's not expectations. Most importantly, there's not a culture of fear, there's a culture of really being vulnerable and sharing what we're going through and how we can support one another.

Now, how do we do that in a virtual setting where most of us are working from home and navigating these changes? I like to say it's really built by one key thing, designing for psychological

safety. Now, first and foremost, what is psychological safety? Psychological safety is not just creating a culture on our team where people can feel safe, it's creating a culture on our teams where they feel safe enough to speak up and share different opinions. To share a mistake and not feel like it's held against them, to bring up problems and tough issues when they don't feel included or when work isn't being done effectively. To avoid rejecting others when they may be in a different circumstance, whether it's navigating a family dynamic or going through mental health challenges in these times, and when it really feels safe enough to ask others for help on the team.

Now, let's be honest, a lot of this is hard in this time and place, but there are a few best practises I want to share that will really allow us to build trust regardless of distance, and most importantly, in this time of change. The first key tip I want to share when it comes to building trust is to really focus on a mindset of giving people the space and place to take risks, to fail fast and fail forward.

And I'd like to share a story from Microsoft CEO, Satya Nadella. A few years ago there was a team at Microsoft that had made a big mistake. They had created a chat bot that ended up being hijacked on Twitter and started creating offensive messages all across the internet, and it created a lot of bad press for Microsoft. But Microsoft CEO, Satya Nadella, responded publicly with a thoughtful and humble apology. But with his own team that ended up making this mistake he didn't chastise them. What he did is he wrote an encouraging email. He said, "Keep pushing and know that I'm with you. It's okay to make mistakes and let's keep learning and growing together."

Now, I want to share that story because I think trust is built more from how we recover from mistakes than simply how we get to know each other over time. So creating that space for people to take risks, to be courageous, to discuss what they're learning and developing and having those improvement moments is where trust is really built. Secondly, trust is also built by modelling the behaviour you want to see in your teams. Role modelling is everything right now. Simply trusting others by valuing their time, scheduling meetings that are thoughtful of different schedules, really thinking about how to drive inclusivity in a meeting.

Even simple things I've seen like having thoughtful agendas before a meeting, having everyone share their ideas in the chat tool in video meetings first and then calling on people with diverse or different perspectives really enables everyone to have a voice to share. Even simply calling them those you haven't heard from shows that you care, that you're paying attention. And then you're really signalling, "I recognise you and I want to hear your voice."

And third last but not least, we have to design for feedback and vulnerability. What that really means is we can't assume that people will share a different opinion, we actually have to embed norms within the ways that we work from home to create it. One leader I know always has one-on-ones where she asks one simple question, "What's a piece of bad news I don't want to hear?" This has actually provoked her team, they know it's coming in every one-on-one they have with her to really be forced to share things they wouldn't normally share.

Other teams I've seen have done practises around this. At the beginning of team meetings they share a win of the week, a challenge of the week. At the end of the meetings now, especially in virtual settings, they share what went well, what didn't go as well, what didn't get set said in the meeting that we need to uncover in our future meetings. And so these are just simple examples that can go a long way in fostering that psychological safety.

The last thing I'll share to really design for safe spaces to speak up is to have true digital water cooler moments. Whether it's digital office hours where everyone is coming together to co-work together, or even Zoom lunches. I think simple intentionality to create that water cooler effect will allow us all to build trust no matter the distance.

Jackie Blondell:

In terms of the leaders, say they're sensing this trust isn't there, do they do a total reset using these elements that you've discussed here or do they slowly try and bring the organisation back? I don't know if your experiences during your lockdowns was that initially when people started working from home you had meetings all the time so they could check you were working. I think some organisations are still doing this. If I start to perceive that the trust isn't there, that they think that they know their workers think they don't trust them, how do they do a research without sort going, "Okay, I need to do this, this, this, and this," is there an easy way to reset for trust?

Erica Dhawan:

At the end of the day I'd say that trust is built over time but it can be sped up through the right mechanisms. And how is trust built? I mean, first I think it's built with clear role modelling from leaders first who say what they'll do and do what they'll say. I'll give you one example. I know one leader named Scott and he works in restructuring. And he was struggling a bit because he realised he needed to fire one of the team members that was not really performing on the team, but that team member had a lot of client relationships, and so Scott kept delaying this firing.

But over time what he realised is that other team members started to delay making fast swift talent decisions, because he was actually role modelling that delaying was okay. He quickly fixed this, he took care of it and he raised it with his team. He was vulnerable to say, "I could have done better here and moving forward here's what I'm going to change." And I think that's an example of what leaders can do very quickly. They can acknowledge their own mistakes and flaws, share their own learning moments and then role model through true action. And I think that's the first step in building trust very swiftly when you have to do a big rehaul.

The second thing that I think is important is to set clear norms moving forward around how teams should operate. And I like to say simple norms, always having that agenda before meetings, designing our video meetings today to think less like office hosts and more like TV show hosts. A TV show host always has to really design for engagement, they call on people. They cut people off if they go too long. They create spaces for shared voices and always summarise themes. These are actually... These are simple communication skills but they can make or break trust and people feeling really aligned and valued for their time.

And the last key thing that I think is important for trust is real initiatives that allow employees to truly feel empowered, to speak up and take risks. Whether it's sparring zones where employees can share true feedback with their leaders and bosses or spaces where they can be empowered to do unique and innovative work that's outside of their core silo. These are the types of mechanisms that can really speed up trust and drive a culture of empowerment.

Jackie Blondell:

It would be ironic if workplaces are finally discovering their humanity through digital outlets. Wouldn't it-

Erica Dhawan:

I think we are. I think we're finding more interconnectivity where instead of just relying on the same five people you go to in the office, we realise that we can include anyone anywhere. And the geographic inclusion is such a powerful opportunity for all of us.

Jackie Blondell:

Absolutely fascinating. I can't wait to see what happens next, which is what we're going to talk about for our last question today. You say that today's digital workplace requires a whole new set of rules, and you mentioned earlier about companies that are going to total digital enterprises in terms of they are all remote. What do you stop with these sets of rules? Have we covered them off or are there any others?

Erica Dhawan:

I think the first step is always to accept that we have a challenge, a problem here. Understanding that body language hasn't disappeared it is transformed and that we're prone to different interpretations of that same digital body language is important to understand. I think the first thing I'd encourage all leaders and teams to do right now is to audit your own digital body language, to really ask yourself how are your messages coming across to others to gather feedback, to ask yourself are you overthinking the messages you received to the point of reading in bad intent?

The second thing is to do a bit of a post-mortem of the last 18 months. What have we learned? What have been the benefits of our digital communication and collaboration and what have been some of the challenges and how will we use this moment in time to not revert or regress back to pre-pandemic behaviours, the meetings that could be emails, the emails that could be meetings, but instead not connect more but truly connect intelligently to maximise the collective expertise of everyone and anyone.

And last but not least in my new book, Digital Body Language and during my session at the congress I'll be sharing four specific rules that I'll give you a quick summary on right now. The first rule is value visibly, which is about valuing time, inboxes, and schedules, not just face-to-face meetings or handshakes. The second is communicate carefully and really thinking before we type and understanding tone. The third is collaborating confidently, which is about truly saying what we'll do and doing what we'll say, prioritising that thoughtfulness over group think. And last but not least is trust totally, which we spoke about today, is about designing for psychological safety no matter the distance.

Jackie Blondell:

Okay. I look forward to hearing more from you at congress. Erica, thanks so much for your time today. Now, to learn more about Erica's work and CPA Australia's Virtual Congress, visit our show notes for the links. Thank you, Erica.

Erica Dhawan:

Thank you.

Outro:

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