

Communication for Online Negotiation

Kluwer Mediation Blog
November 8, 2018

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Please refer to this post as: Andrea Maia, 'Communication for Online Negotiation', Kluwer Mediation Blog, November 8, 2018, <http://mediationblog.kluwerarbitration.com/2018/11/08/communication-for-online-negotiation/>

Online negotiators are often faced with the challenge of how to overcome barriers on communication. When in real life (or better, when in non digital life) body language, voice tone and appearance enrich the communication process giving more tools for both communicators to express and understand the message, therefore making any negotiation more fluid and easier to build a rapport with your counterpart. People tend to share more information when in person, but in online negotiations, they tend to hold back private information. This is due to the fact that any communication process is a two way street, which depends on both the sender and the receiver. How many times have you written a very thoughtful e-mail but the receiver didn't read it with attention? Or maybe in whatsapp sometimes we left waiting for hours before an answer comes along.

Nevertheless, the benefits of online dispute resolution are well known: it breaks geographic and economic barriers and saves money and time for participants. Besides, it is a gateway for data collection and development of new technologies, softwares and artificial intelligence. In a smaller scale, as individual professionals of Alternative Dispute Resolution, we can benefit greatly of Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) if only we are aware of which techniques and strategies best apply in this field.

Nowadays, we don't have to rely solely in emails for online negotiation. There is a mix of different ways to communicate, with platforms providing different possibilities of written and oral communication and synchronous and asynchronous models, besides the use of video messages or voice combined. Those elements will determine several aspects of your preparation and behavior during the negotiation.

For example, when dealing with a video call, even though the communication will lose some of its richness, several elements of real life negotiation will be present: negotiators will be able to use facial expression, different gestures and body language and their outfit. Since people will not be present in the same room, it is very important to be aware of all those elements, because they tend to be magnified by the camera. Besides, the room you are in is very important as well. If possible, look for a silent place, with good light and where you will not be interrupted.

In online negotiation using only voice, negotiators will still be able to use other aspects of nonverbal communication such as their voice tone and volume, pauses, interjections and other idiomatic expressions. Oral expression provides more hints and possibilities of trust building for negotiators. It also tends to be less rigid, giving a wide range of possibilities from more to less formal.

On platforms that offer only written ways of communication, the same goals of basic negotiation will apply and nonverbal communication will still be crucial for building trust. Other hints for people doing written negotiation: usually using only capital letters will be perceived as if the person is shouting or being rude. Also, excessive usage of exclamation marks might give the impression of anxiety or being emotional.

One possible innovation, depending on the type of business or counterpart, is the usage of unusual resources in more formal contexts such as jokes, emojis or even gifs. Those might help lighten the mood of a conversation.

Lastly, it is possible that written communication is made in asychronal manners. On the one hand, this will enable negotiators to plan better and control the moment they share valuable information. On the other hand, this type of communication takes away our opportunity to receive and share perceptions with our counterpart. Focus on the benefits of the type you have chosen.

Online communication is already part of our everyday life for years now. I am sure we will keep learning how to improve this art for our field of work.