

Digital Disconnect: Generational Misunderstandings and the Role of AI at Work

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Abstract

Digital communication has changed how people communicate at work through email, instant messaging, collaboration platforms, and AI-assisted tools. However, employees may have different communication preferences and expectations, which can lead to misunderstandings, especially in workplaces with employees of different ages. Guided by Mannheim's theory of generations, this study explores workplace digital communication preferences, perceived misunderstandings, and attitudes toward AI-assisted communication. A quantitative survey was completed by 42 respondents from different age groups and professional backgrounds. The descriptive results show that 83.3% of respondents believe employees from different generations may interpret digital messages differently. In addition, 85.7% believe AI can help make workplace communication clearer, while 64.3% think AI-generated messages can sound fake. Scenario-based responses suggest that respondents in the two larger age groups generally value clear, polite, and constructive communication, although some preferences differ. Because the study uses a small convenience sample, the findings are exploratory and should be interpreted with caution. The study offers practical suggestions for improving cross-generational communication, developing workplace communication guidelines, and using AI tools while maintaining a personal touch.

Keywords: Generational Differences, Digital Communication, Workplace Communication, Communication Conflict, Multigenerational Workplace, Artificial Intelligence

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1. INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have reshaped workplace communication by enabling employees to exchange information through email, instant messaging, video conferencing, and collaborative platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Slack. These tools have increased flexibility and connectivity. While these technologies have improved productivity and flexibility, they have also introduced new communication challenges. Unlike face-to-face interactions, digital communication often lacks nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, voice tone and body language, making messages more susceptible to misunderstanding and misinterpretation (Walther, 1996).

These challenges become even more complex in today's multigenerational workforce. Organizations now employ Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z, each of whom has developed different communication habits based on the technologies available during their formative years (Urlick et al., 2017). Older and younger generations may differ in their workplace communication preferences due to differences in experiences, expectations, and familiarity with communication technologies. Older employees may prefer more formal communication methods, while younger employees, particularly Generation Z, may be more comfortable with digital platforms, instant messaging, and informal communication styles shaped by their extensive exposure to social media and mobile technologies (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Janssen & Carradini, 2021). As a result, the same digital message may be interpreted differently across generations. For example, a brief response such as "OK" or "Need this ASAP" may be viewed as efficient and direct by one employee but perceived as rude, dismissive, or unprofessional by another. Differences in message tone, response-time expectations and communication norms can contribute to workplace misunderstandings.

Recent advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly generative AI tools and Large Language Models (LLMs), have introduced a new dimension to workplace communication. Employees increasingly use AI-supported tools to assist with tasks such as drafting emails, improving grammar, adjusting tone, summarizing information, and clarifying messages. These technologies have the potential to enhance workplace communication by improving message quality, efficiency, and clarity across different communication styles. However, AI-assisted communication also introduces new challenges. AI-generated messages may be perceived as less authentic, overly standardized, or disconnected from the sender's personal communication style, which may influence trust and interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Furthermore, employees from different generations may vary in their knowledge of AI, comfort with using new technologies, and willingness to depend on AI tools. These differences may influence how they use, trust, and evaluate AI-assisted communication. (Van Quaquebeke & Gerpott, 2024).

Although prior research has examined workplace email misunderstandings (Byron, 2008; Giumetti et al., 2013), generational perspectives on workplace communication (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Lyons et al., 2015; Urlick et al., 2017), and Generation Z communication habits (Janssen & Carradini, 2021), these studies address related aspects of the problem. Further research is needed to understand how employees' digital communication preferences and perceptions of AI-assisted communication relate to message interpretation and workplace misunderstandings across age groups.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how digital communication styles differ across generations and how these differences contribute to workplace misunderstandings and conflict. In addition, this research investigates the role of AI-assisted communication in multigenerational workplaces, including whether AI tools improve message clarity, reduce misunderstandings, or create new communication challenges. Using a survey of employees from multiple generations and industries, this study explores differences in communication preferences, message interpretation, response-time expectations, emoji usage, and AI adoption. The findings aim to provide practical recommendations for

organizations seeking to improve digital communication, help reduce workplace conflict, and responsibly integrate AI into multigenerational work environments. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

Main Research Question

MRQ: How do differences in digital communication styles across generations lead to workplace misunderstandings and conflict and what role does AI-assisted communication play in these situations?

- RQ1: Do different generations have different digital communication styles in the workplace?
- RQ2: Do differences in digital communication styles contribute to workplace misunderstandings or conflict?
- RQ3: How does AI-assisted communication affect message clarity, misunderstandings, and communication challenges across generations?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Generational Differences in Workplace Communication

Generational differences have become an important area of organizational research as today's workforce includes employees from multiple generations with different values, work expectations, and workplace preferences (Lyons et al., 2015; Urick et al., 2017). Mannheim's theory of generations suggests that individuals who experience similar historical, social, and technological events during their formative years may develop shared perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors that influence their experiences throughout adulthood (Mannheim, 1952). Therefore, communication preferences may vary across generations because employees develop different communication habits based on their technological exposure, social experiences, and workplace environments.

In this study, Mannheim's theory of generations provides a conceptual perspective for examining how shared historical and technological experiences may relate to workplace communication preferences. Employees who grew up with different communication technologies may develop different expectations regarding message formality, response time, and the use of informal digital cues such as emojis. This perspective informs the study's examination of communication preferences and scenario-based message interpretations across age groups. However, age is not equivalent to generational membership, and differences between age groups may also reflect work experience, job roles, organizational culture, and individual technology familiarity. Therefore, the study treats age-group comparisons as exploratory rather than assuming that all members of a generation share the same communication preferences.

Previous studies suggest that generational groups may differ in workplace communication preferences due to differences in technological experiences and communication habits developed over time. Baby Boomers and Generation X employees have often been associated with greater use of traditional communication channels, such as email, telephone conversations, and scheduled meetings, whereas Millennials and Generation Z employees tend to report greater familiarity with instant messaging, collaborative platforms, and more informal digital communication styles (Twenge, 2010; Eastman & Liu, 2012; Janssen & Carradini, 2021). These differences may also appear in digital communication behaviors, including expectations regarding response time, message length, tone, and the use of emojis or informal language. However, researchers emphasize that generational differences should not be viewed as fixed characteristics or stereotypes, because individual experiences, organizational culture, job roles, and technology familiarity also influence workplace communication behaviors (Lyons et al., 2015).

2.2 Digital Communication and Workplace Conflict

Digital communication can contribute to workplace conflict because online messages often lack nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language, making interpretation more difficult (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Walther, 1996). Employees may interpret the same message differently depending on their communication expectations, experiences, and workplace norms.

Research suggests that differences in communication styles, technology use, and expectations regarding response time and message tone can create misunderstandings and reduce collaboration among

employees (Byron, 2008; Giumetti et al., 2013). These studies provide foundational evidence about digital communication challenges, although they predate the widespread use of contemporary workplace collaboration platforms and generative AI. More recent research on Generation Z workplace communication habits (Janssen & Carradini, 2021) and AI in workplace communication (Van Quaquebeke & Gerpott, 2024) helps situate these issues in current workplace settings. Therefore, successful digital communication requires not only effective technology but also shared expectations about communication practices.

2.3 AI-Assisted Communication

The emergence of Generative AI has introduced new possibilities for improving workplace communication. AI tools such as ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Google Gemini, Claude, and Grammarly are increasingly used to assist employees with drafting emails, improving grammar, adjusting tone, summarizing information, and clarifying messages (Dwivedi et al., 2023). These capabilities may improve communication quality by helping employees create clearer and more effective workplace messages.

However, AI-assisted communication also introduces new challenges. AI-generated messages may be perceived as overly formal, standardized, or less authentic, which may influence trust and interpersonal relationships in workplace interactions (Van Quaquebeke & Gerpott, 2024). In addition, employees may differ in their willingness to adopt and trust AI tools based on technology familiarity, AI literacy, and personal attitudes toward automation (Park et al., 2024). Despite the rapid growth of AI use in organizations, limited research has examined how AI-assisted communication affects interactions among employees from different generations or whether AI reduces or creates new communication challenges.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative survey design to examine digital communication styles across generations and to investigate the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in workplace communication. A structured questionnaire was developed and distributed in both online and Word document formats to collect data on employees' communication preferences, experiences with workplace misunderstandings, AI usage, and perceptions of cross-generational communication.

The survey consisted of demographic questions, Likert-scale statements, multiple-choice questions, and scenario-based questions. This combination allowed participants to report their communication behaviors while also evaluating realistic workplace communication situations. The survey instrument was designed to address the study's three research questions by measuring communication preferences, workplace misunderstandings, AI adoption, and organizational strategies for improving communication.

3.2 Participants/Population of the Study

The target population consisted of adults currently employed in professional or organizational settings across different industries and work arrangements. Participants were recruited through professional and personal networks using a nonprobability convenience-sampling approach. A total of 42 respondents completed the survey. Participation was voluntary, and responses were collected anonymously. Because the sample was based on convenience sampling, the findings may not represent the broader working population.

For exploratory analysis, respondents were grouped into three age categories: 18–29, 30–45, and 46–60 years. These categories were selected for descriptive comparison rather than as definitive boundaries for generational membership. Age groups may differ in work experience, job responsibilities, and familiarity with technology, so observed differences cannot automatically be attributed to generational effects.

3.3 Survey Instrument/Tool

The survey consisted of six sections designed to address the study's research questions. Section A collected demographic information, including age, gender, industry, job position, work experience, and work arrangement. Sections B and C examined digital communication preferences, communication styles, and workplace misunderstandings using five-point Likert-scale questions. Section D explored participants' use of AI tools such as ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Google Gemini, Claude, and Grammarly for workplace communication. Section E presented workplace communication scenarios to examine how participants interpreted common digital interactions, while Section F gathered participants' opinions regarding strategies for improving cross-generational communication in organizations.

3.4 Data Analysis

The survey data were summarized using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. For RQ1, responses about communication preferences and message interpretation were summarized by age group. For RQ2, responses about misunderstandings and conflict were summarized using frequencies and percentages. For RQ3, responses about AI use, perceived clarity, authenticity, and AI-assisted communication scenarios were summarized. Exploratory comparisons between the age groups 18–29 and 30–45 were made using percentages; the 46–60 group was not compared separately because it included only four respondents. No inferential statistical test was specified, so findings are interpreted descriptively and are not treated as evidence of statistically significant differences.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive Analysis: Main Findings

Descriptive analysis was used to summarize the responses from all 42 participants.

Table 1. The percentages represent respondents who selected “Agree” or “Strongly Agree.”

Survey statement	Agree / strongly agree	Percentage
Generations interpret digital messages differently	35 of 42	83.3%
Response-time differences create misunderstandings	30 of 42	71.4%
Cross-generational communication training would improve teamwork	38 of 42	90.5%
Organizations should establish communication guidelines	37 of 42	88.1%
AI helps communication clarity	36 of 42	85.7%
AI makes communication more professional	37 of 42	88.1%
AI-generated messages can sound fake	27 of 42	64.3%
AI may remove personal communication style	22 of 42	52.4%

4.2 Scenario-Based Comparison by Age Group

Scenario-based responses were compared between respondents aged 18–29 ($n = 15$) and 30–45 ($n = 23$), for a total of 38 respondents. The four respondents aged 46–60 were excluded from this comparison because the group was too small to support a meaningful age-group comparison. Therefore, the

scenario-based analysis focuses on the two larger age groups, while the overall descriptive analysis in Section 4.1 includes all 42 respondents.

Table 2. Scenario-Based Communication Preferences among Respondents Aged 18–29 and 30–45 (n = 38)

Scenario preference	Age 18-29 (n=15)	Age 30-45 (n=23)
Polite/formal request (receive)	86.7%	73.9%
Polite deadline (receive)	80.0%	73.9%
Friendly short reply (receive)	73.3%	52.2%
Clear meeting request (receive)	86.7%	78.3%
Polite urgent request (receive)	80.0%	60.9%
AI-rewritten request (send)	86.7%	78.3%
Constructive feedback (send)	100.0%	95.7%
Emoji praise (send)	93.3%	65.2%
Polite/human-like message (receive)	53.3%	52.2%

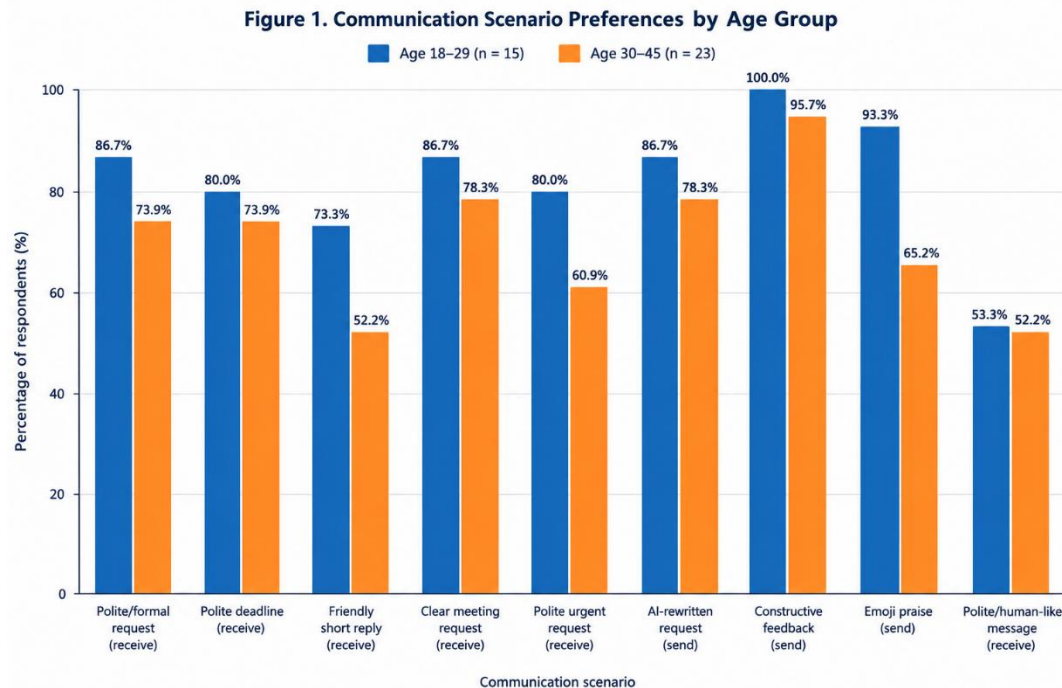


Figure 1. Scenario-based message preferences by age group.

4.3 Interpretation of Scenario-Based Results

Both age groups showed strong preferences for constructive feedback, with 100.0% of respondents aged 18–29 and 95.7% of respondents aged 30–45 selecting this option. Polite/formal requests were

also popular, selected by 86.7% of the younger group and 73.9% of the older group. Similarly, the AI-rewritten request was selected by 86.7% and 78.3% of respondents, respectively. These findings suggest that clear, respectful, and well-written messages may be valued by employees across age groups.

Some differences appeared in specific scenarios. The polite urgent request was selected by 80.0% of respondents aged 18–29, compared with 60.9% of those aged 30–45. The friendly short reply was preferred by 73.3% of the younger group and 52.2% of the older group. Emoji praise showed another noticeable difference, with 93.3% of respondents aged 18–29 and 65.2% of respondents aged 30–45 selecting this option. In contrast, preferences for a polite, human-like message were nearly identical, at 53.3% and 52.2%, respectively.

Overall, the descriptive findings indicate some variation in communication scenario preferences between the two age groups, alongside substantial similarities. Because the study used a small convenience sample, these differences should be interpreted cautiously and should not be generalized to the wider workforce.

5. CONCLUSION REMARKS

This study explored workplace digital communication preferences, perceived misunderstandings, and attitudes toward AI-assisted communication among employees of different ages. Among the 42 respondents, 83.3% believed employees from different generations may interpret digital messages differently, and 71.4% agreed that differences in response-time expectations can contribute to misunderstandings.

The findings also showed that respondents generally viewed AI-assisted communication positively. A total of 85.7% believed AI could help make workplace communication clearer, and 88.1% believed it could make communication more professional. However, 64.3% thought AI-generated messages could sound fake. This suggests that although AI may help employees prepare clearer messages, maintaining a natural and personal communication style remains important.

The scenario-based comparison showed that respondents in both age groups generally preferred constructive feedback and polite, clear messages. Some differences appeared in preferences for urgent requests, short replies, and emoji praise. At the same time, responses to some scenarios, such as polite and human-like messages, were very similar. These findings suggest that communication preferences may vary among employees, but age alone cannot explain how people interpret workplace messages.

Based on these findings, organizations could provide communication training, establish clear guidelines for message tone and response times, and encourage employees to use AI tools thoughtfully. AI may be useful for improving clarity and professionalism, but employees should review AI-generated messages to ensure they reflect their intended meaning and personal communication style.

This study has several limitations. It included only 42 respondents recruited through convenience sampling, and just four respondents were aged 46–60. In addition, the analysis was descriptive and did not use inferential statistical tests. The findings should therefore be considered preliminary rather than representative of the wider workforce.

Future research could use larger and more diverse samples to examine how communication preferences relate to age, work experience, job responsibilities, and familiarity with AI. Researchers could also investigate whether communication training and organizational guidelines help reduce misunderstandings in real workplace settings. Further study of AI-assisted communication could help organizations understand how to balance clarity and professionalism with authenticity and trust.

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