

Partnerships: Communication Tips

The reliability of communications technology varies widely from country to country and region to region in Africa, and this can lead to frustration on the part of US partners who feel that their African partner “doesn’t respond” to them. In many cases, the internet is not easily accessed—either it’s not available nearby (making travel to an internet café necessary) or the electricity is off or the internet is down, or some combination of those!

If e-mail is working for communication with your partner, great. If not, there are some other options:

- 1) If you have identified someone as a contact person and have that person’s cell phone number, call him/her (see more info below). Cell phone service is usually more reliable than internet in Africa. (Note: Some cell phones can’t receive international calls). It’s best to have the name and number (and e-mail address) for more than one person at your partner hospice—that way you can still maintain contact even if someone leaves.
- 2) Regular mail: Some partnerships find that regular mail is the most reliable way of communicating. There’s a time delay, but at least it’s easier to understand the written word than the spoken word, which makes for clearer communication when e-mail isn’t a good option
- 3) Identify the relative or friend of someone who works at your partner hospice who does have access to the internet, and ask that person to be a “courier” between you and your partner.

Phone calling: There are many options for calling someone in Africa. One of the easiest is Skype, an internet calling system. You can download the Skype application for free at www.skype.com, then you can purchase “Skype out” credit (using a credit card—this is secure and I have done it many times) so that you can make international calls. Rates to different countries vary, but you can check on the Skype website. You will need a Skype-compatible headset (with a USB port—available anywhere computer accessories are sold) unless your computer has a built-in microphone and speakers. Calling is easy—you just click on the dial pad, choose the country you are calling, and dial as if you were calling from within that country (no 011+ country code). Pingo, another internet calling system, has also been recommended and is apparently cheaper for calls to Africa, though calls are often dropped (this happens a lot when calling African countries anyway).

If your partner has access to an internet connection that’s faster than dial-up, he or she can use Skype to call you. If you call computer-to-computer, it’s entirely free.

Another option is to purchase a phone card for your partner’s cell phone, so he/she can call you, but this is usually more expensive, and is best used when the partner has an urgent message.

The best thing for improving communication is going over to visit your partner. Then you’ll be able to get everyone’s phone number and e-mail. You’ll develop a relationship and communication will naturally improve. Happy communicating!

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One of our colleagues in Africa made several really good observations about why U.S. partners may not get prompt responses (i.e., email) from their African partners, which are listed below:

1. Unreliable internet: This is part of the reason for sure but perhaps not as much as some of the following.
2. People in leadership positions did not grow up with nor receive the training necessary to use/respond to emails quickly. They tend to have been introduced to computers as adults. They have no keyboarding skills. They lack the kind of organic intuitiveness about how to make things happen in programs, and often, there is a discomfort with writing in English. Trying to peck keys to answer a long list of emails is daunting. Many use a secretary to answer their emails because they can't themselves. This adds a layer and more delay.
3. Most do not have email at home. So it is only an office based task competing for other uses of their office based time.
4. People are not yet addicted to their emails here. Busy people will look at emails a couple times a week. They cannot commit the couple hours a day to email that many of us have fallen into as westerners. "I can pause in my administrative day now to write this email but my surgeon needs to be operating."
5. People do not have the same urgency about how quickly to answer. Five years ago we were still using international mail which took two weeks each way to reach the States. It's surprising how often a visitor or student who is planning a trip to Tanzania, say ten months from now, will resend their message of inquiry, after just 3 - 4 days of not receiving a response. In the US we expect instant response to our emails, particularly in work related matters. That's not yet the norm here in Africa.

So there are many obstructions to quick turn-around times. Guess it may be part of our need to be better communicators cross culturally. Our African partners need to understand more clearly the frustrations that Americans have in waiting and then in turn, our American partners to realize that slow responses are not intentional, not impolite, and don't carry any value judgment about the relationship.

Hopefully this helps to shed some light...

Marc Jacobson, Hospital Director for Selian Lutheran Hospitals in Arusha, northern Tanzania & APCA Board Chair

Cut from a CHAT Site Visit report to Gonja Lutheran Hospital Tanzania:

Office: The computer is working but underutilized; a challenge for them. They try to check email daily using the "karani"- the Swahili word for a bookkeeper and a computer trained and literate person. It was sorted out that many key people (NPI Director, Tanzania Directors, U.S. Partners, FHSSA) were put by Yahoo into their Spam folder! They will need a new UPS – a Universal Portal System designed as an uninterruptible power supply which protects the computer against power failure.