

By CHRIS STOKEL-WALKER

AS managing director of a transport consultancy, Carol Deveney is used to celebrating completed projects with her clients in government and at engineering firms.

While she'd usually be able to congratulate her clients in person, the lockdown meant switching to text-based chat tools, where emoji added a bit of levity.

"Text messages just seem a bit bland," said Deveney.

"I was trying to put my friendly nature into the message.

"It was: 'Here's the jazz hands,' like, 'Ta-da, we got this done.' But they're not jazz hands."

Her son quickly told her the real name of the emoji is "hugging face", which is officially meant to be an offer of a hug.

That kind of confusion is commonplace in workplaces around the world, according to a survey of 9,400 hybrid workers across North America, Asia and Europe by workplace communications provider Slack and language learning app *Duolingo*.

Emoji have become a vital part of workplace communication, with 71% of American workers saying messages not peppered with the pictorial icons are incomplete in meaning.

Globally, more than half of workers include emoji in messages sent to colleagues – though 30% refuse to do so with their boss.

"As we continue to embrace hybrid work, emoji help people acknowledge one another, clarify intent, and add a little colour, depth and fun to work," said Olivia Grace, senior director of product management at Slack.

It's also seen as more efficient by 54% of workers worldwide, with two-thirds of American respondents saying it speeds up communication.

"Emoji are a significant and net positive communication tool in our digital



Fist bump or punch?

Emoji mishaps can cause confusion at the workplace.

Graphics: Freepik.com

world," said Keith Broni, editor-in-chief of Emojipedia, an online reference encyclopaedia whose parent company sits on the body that approves emoji for public use.

"They really can enable us to clarify emotional intent and the means through which our messages will be interpreted by the recipient. This has never been more important than in the last two years."

However, as hybrid work increasingly embraces cross-border working, and businesses are able to cherry pick employees from different countries, the risk of that mis-sive being misconstrued increases, as in the case of Deveney and her "jazz hands".

In all, 58% of survey respondents say they didn't realise specific emoji had different meanings, and the potential issues that could cause.

Take the smiley face emoji, officially termed the "slightly smiling face".

Globally, people most closely associate the symbol with feeling happy and general positivity.

But beware a message with a smiley face in the United States or Singapore: one in five people in both countries use it to show exasperation.

In Japan, just one in 20 employees would catch on to that more subtle, subversive meaning.

Caution is also advised when deploying the peach emoji.

Seven in 10 respondents took the symbol literally, missing its more euphemistic meaning more common elsewhere.

And in China, 56% of workers took the eggplant or aubergine emoji to mean just that. Large parts of the rest of the world would snigger at that.

"There is always potential for someone to look at an emoji and think it means X, but the most common understanding of that emoji is Y," said Broni.

It all makes for a potential minefield of misinterpretation, one that Deveney's keen to avoid in the future.

At first, she considered sending an apology message explaining her misunderstanding, then decided she was overthinking it.

But the hugging face-jazz hands emoji has been consigned to history, she said: "I've stopped sending emoji in any business message." – Bloomberg