

Lessons in e-mail etiquette

By **BLYTHE BERNHARD**
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On the golf course. In the movie theater. Even in the bathroom stall. There's no limit to where e-mail addicts will check their inbox. But it's not just about keeping up on the job — there could be a biological reason for the urge to click.

Some doctors believe that a new message in the inbox can trigger brain chemicals that elicit a "high" similar to a jackpot or drug hit. That pleasurable sensation can, in certain people, lead to a compulsion to check e-mail. Now, psychologists and executive coaches have created e-mail addiction treatments, and some have even rewritten the 12 steps for e-addictions.

In the workplace, overuse or improper use of e-mails can lead to reduced productivity and sexual-harassment or wrongful-termination lawsuits. But some business experts say the hype over e-mail addiction is overblown, saying the constant connectivity improves communications and helps operations more than it hurts.

Sallie Rodman of Los Alamitos, Calif., checks her e-mail a minimum of six times a day, including on weekends and vacations. She says her laptop computer is her security blanket, and she prefers e-mailing her friends over calling.

"I write, so I can think about how I want to say something and edit it," says Rodman, who works for a city councilwoman. "When you call someone, you can't be rude and cut to the chase, you have to talk a while first."

Curing e-mail addiction is a lost cause, says Cherie Kerr, founder of ExecuProv business consulting in Santa Ana. What's more important is helping people improve their e-mailing manners.

She offers one-day classes in e-mail etiquette, and has written a book, "The Bliss or 'Diss' Connection? E-mail Etiquette for the Business Professional." Kerr talked recently about e-mail.

Q: How did you get inspired to write this book?

KERR: I was in Philadelphia,

getting on a plane, and my sister e-mailed me news about the death of my cousin's husband. How did we get to obit by e-mail? I thought, 'We've got to do something about this.'

Q: How prevalent is e-mail addiction, and is this something that needs to be overcome for our health?

A: We're all addicted to it. I also agree with the idea that there's no way we're going to kick the addiction. The addiction is going to get worse. But we need to have some manners and decorum. If people had a certain set of rules they could follow, maybe we would not be as manic about using e-mails. It's about how to use e-mail to strengthen people instead of alienating them.

Q: What is the downside of communicating by e-mail?

A: In my interviews with people, there were people who had lost business clients because of e-mail. There were people who blew up and said they said things they never should have said and got fired. There's a lot of negative impact because people can't hear your voice. They can't read your tone. You can get sued. You can get your company in trouble. There's a major impact on how we keep our relationships. It's really easy to lose friends and not influence people.

Q: How do you help people improve their e-mail skills?

A: I teach a one-day class. People bring their e-mails in, and we give them e-mails to do. One of the rules I have is after three e-mails, you should pick up the phone if you really want to have a meaningful relationship. You can't just e-mail back and forth. It's still really important to get on the phone or to see them in person.

Don't ever send bad news through e-mail. Don't criticize. Don't ever e-mail special congratulations. Write them a personal note. Otherwise it doesn't mean much because people use e-mail for mundane reasons.

Q: How about rules for work e-mail?

A: Don't ever fire anybody or quit by e-mail. Find out what someone's preferences are in

e-mail. Find out how much they want by e-mail, how much they want to talk. Always give two positives for every negative.

Let them see you in your e-mails, show some personality. See the communication needs from the other guy's point of view.

If someone comes into your office, you should not be turning around to look at your screen.

Don't take PDAs to meetings, to lunch, to the bathroom.

Q: What do you mean by the bliss or diss connection?

A: We're hiding behind technology so much we're not talking. We're not meeting people as much and that's really unfortunate. Pick up the phone if you get an e-mail expressing hurt. Stop your e-mail to attend to the live person.

ETIQUETTE QUIZ

Here's a "yes" or "no" quiz to determine if you might have an e-mail problem:

1. I use e-mail every day.
2. I only use e-mail at the office.
3. I check e-mail during every waking hour.
4. More than 40 percent of my communication with others is done through e-mail.
5. I check e-mails all weekend.
6. I send e-mails to others within my office.
7. I check e-mails during meetings.
8. I feel compelled to answer e-mails as soon as I read them.
9. I check e-mail while on vacation.
10. I sometimes lie in order to find a way to check my e-mail when I know I'm not supposed to.
11. I check e-mail while I'm talking on the phone to others.
12. I prefer sending an e-mail rather than making a phone call.
13. I prefer sending an e-mail rather than meeting someone in person.

If you answer "yes" to most questions ("no" on number 2) you might have an unhealthy e-mail habit. Try to set rules for yourself: Only check e-mail a few scheduled times of the day; don't check e-mail in public places; leave the PDA behind more often.