

The Toronto Star

When the tedium is the message

By Christopher Hutsul

Once a means of communication only among the technologically elite, e-mail has become a big part of our social and business lives. But do we really know how and when to use it? Does the endless flood of spam burden us, or does its infinite connectivity empower us in wonderful ways?

As society, we've only had our mitts on the technology for half a decade. It has entrenched itself as a mode of interaction in our business and social lives, even though its nuances are sometimes poorly understood.

Those who study communication think we need to log off for a while to consider the politics – and mechanics – of e-mail, for its rewards are tempered by pitfalls.

“It is a more passive form of communication, but it's got its own risks,” says Christina Cavanagh, an e-mail expert and former professor of management communications at the Richard Ivey School of Business at the University of Western Ontario.

“What might be thought of you and your message if it's inappropriate?”

“What tends to happen in the workplace is that people can hit the send button, you've got the thinking and emotion all at once. If you're not careful, then the message that comes across to the other might not be seen in the light you wanted.”

Roger Davies, CEO of McLuhan & Davies Communications, a firm that specializes in communication-skills training, conducts programs for companies that want to educate staff about how to use e-mail effectively.

Theoretically, he says, e-mail should enable us to carefully compose messages with the appropriate length, tone and structure, but that doesn't always happen in practice.

“It's too easy to respond quickly, in a conversational manner, and then press the send button,” he says. “Your answer is focused more than a voice message, or a discussion, because it is in writing. But the speed with which most of us respond to an e-mail sometimes means that thoughts are incomplete – with the added complication that the writing tone may not be appropriate.”

Cavanagh also believes e-mail is an ineffective means of communication for our personal lives. She doesn't believe a couple can form a bond electronically.

“E-mail is not going to establish a relationship,” she says. “What it's going to do is be an entry-point for people to get to know each other face-to-face. If you're really talking

about building some kind of relationship, e-mail is only going to be there as a supplementary tool to the coffee, the meetings, the lunches.

“I’ve talked to people who have long-distance relationships and they say e-mails are okay once in a while, but most people actually pick up the telephone. And why do they do that? They want to hear the voice. They want to be able to just be in a more human mode.”

Cavanagh even points to the theories of a pioneer of communications studies to burst e-mail’s bubble.

“It’s Marshall McLuhan’s notion that the medium is the message. If you’re going to send an e-mail instead of picking up the telephone, that in itself transmits a message.”

Davies says: “The main thing to bear in mind is that e-mail is an imperfect communication medium.” “It lacks the human touch. Studies show that face-to-face communication is considered by far the best communication method. Because you can hear, see and read the body language for a more complete communication.”

“We are technically the most connected society in history,” Davies says, “but we are also, at a human level, the most disconnected society in history. The challenge we all face is how to bridge that apparent contradiction. How do we add the human touch to offset the disadvantages of our communication technology?”

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