
Maddening pace of e-mail dialogue

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Two recent reports from the UK confirm the relentless rise of e-mail-related stress. One of them demonstrates the quickening pace of e-mail dialogue, with a third of UK businesses now reportedly expecting a reply to an enquiry within two hours, and a small but fast-growing contingent who expect it within 30 minutes.

This is bound to set up a stressful relationship between any two businesses that operate with different expectations.

More dramatic is the stress that goes with being unable to access our e-mails at all. It seems that being 'offline' is now regarded as an unnatural state.

Nearly half of UK businessmen, and women, say they feel stressed if they can't access their e-mails while away from the office during working hours.

That is an indicator of an unhealthy operating environment as fixed working hours become increasingly meaningless in today's business culture of 24/7 entrepreneurship.

Furthermore, the other widely-reported stressor is the dread of coming back to an overflowing inbox after being offline for just half a day.

E-mail on our cellphones is fast becoming a standard necessity and as it is hard to switch off our cellphone during our so-called off-duty hours, e-mail is fast becoming a serious threat to our natural work/life balance.

System crash

The other report is even more startling. A nationwide survey of directors, office workers and managers in the UK has added a new word to the language: 'e-rage' which has manifested itself by people hitting, kicking or throwing computers against the wall in frustration.

Apparently one of the chief causes of 'e-rage' is having to deal with e-mail downtime following a system breakdown or power-outage.

This really dramatises the amount of e-mail dependence we have allowed to build up, and we only have to consider the illogicality of this reaction to see that a basic change of attitude is necessary.

One suggestion is to outsource our e-mail. Small businesses in particular are inclined to use unqualified personnel to set up their e-mail systems, so they are more likely to experience costly downtime.

The survey showed that 'e-rage' was much lower in businesses that used a professional third-party host to manage their e-mail communications.

But we really need a more mature outlook on the whole issue of e-mail. Like fire, it might be called a 'good friend but a dangerous master'.

It is not a perfect system and, in fact, one e-mail in every few hundred simply never arrives. So whilst we should respect and use its enormous power, its capability needs to be kept in proportion.

Perhaps sometimes, we should set aside a whole day to be e-mail-free, simply to go 'off the air' and experience the temporary respite from the stress of being a 'slave' to our inbox. Of course, when we open it again - the lists will be longer and the headaches will reoccur!

The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.