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New light on e-mail stress

How easily the so-called 'urgent' can get in the way of the merely 'important'

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News

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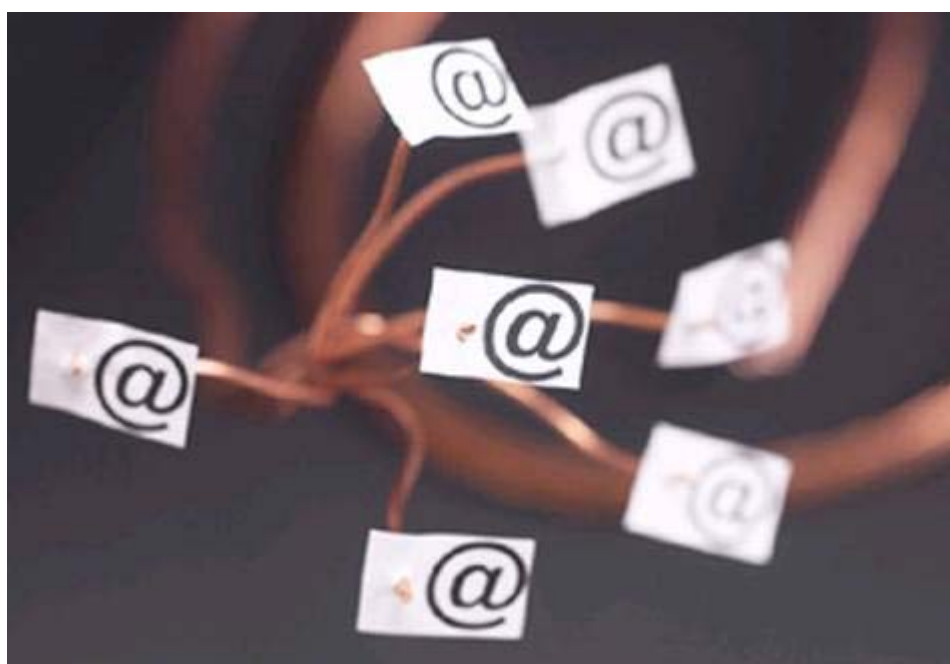


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As a specialist in work-related stress, I notice a growing body of media coverage about the pressures of e-mail, a topic I have covered more than once in this column.

Not for the first time, I have found the readers' comments at the end of an article to be more stimulating than the article itself. In an international e-magazine about philosophies of modern life, someone wrote a fairly unremarkable piece about the stress of the "you have e-mail!" message, and the feasibility of keeping it switched off.

But the readers' comments raged to and fro, raising the debate to a new level altogether, and providing fresh insights into stress psychology.

One reader firmly defended the need to monitor her e-mails continuously. "Suppose a meeting had to be rescheduled at the last moment", she pointed out.

Encouraging bad habits

The next reader criticised this over-conscientious attitude. He said he kept a notice on his wall: "Bad planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part."

By automatically accepting the crisis nature of the situation each time, he was not only

raising his own mental stress levels but encouraging a bad executive habit.

Some people try to motivate themselves by setting-up artificial emergencies and some even enjoy doing this because it makes them feel powerful. (Dodi Fayed often used to change his plans at the last moment, for the fun of watching servants scampering about and there are those who have argued that this tendency cost him his life.)

Another reader pointed out that e-mail was not actually designed to be the instant communication channel that it is now taken to be.

In essence, e-mail is simply a file of instant communication, presented on-screen in a highly efficient and accessible format.

Anyone who has studied time management soon notices how easily the so-called 'urgent' can get in the way of the merely 'important'.

A typical day's e-mail activity shows this happening on an increasing scale, with inevitable stress effects.

And a typical working day may extend to 24 hours for the growing number of executives who are expected, by head office, to carry their Blackberry with them, at all times — like the reader who sarcastically reported how "exciting" it was to be woken at 3am on a Friday by his boss wanting clarification on a contract.

Relative freedom

This shows how e-mail stress can, if left unchecked, totally dominate work and leisure.

One reader marvelled that his life had totally changed since he only switched on his Blackberry for one hour a day. He calculated that he had cut his stress-levels by 45 per cent, and thanked the website for advocating this proposal in the first place.

Another had been retired for 12 months and said that every morning he still woke up relishing the sheer freedom of not having to deal with an overflowing e-mail box!

Don't get tied down

- Answering emails 24/7 can damage our health and productivity
- It takes determination to close our mail box
- E-mail was not designed for instant response at the expense of all else

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.