

# \*!#@ The E-Mail. Can We Talk?

## Face-to-face meetings can trump technology. Some companies call for “no e-mail Fridays.”

by Diane Brady, *BusinessWeek*, 4 Dec 2006, page 109

[http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/06\\_49/b4012096.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/06_49/b4012096.htm)

Scott A. Dockter knew things were bad when he found himself e-mailing his assistant seated a few feet away. But it was more than his own e-mail habit that prompted the CEO of PBD Worldwide Fulfillment Services in Alpharetta, Ga., to launch “no e-mail Fridays.” He suspected that overdependence on e-mail at PBD, which offers services like call center management and distribution, was hurting productivity and perhaps sales. So in July, he instructed his 275 employees to pick up the phone or meet in person each Friday, and reduce e-mail use the rest of the time.

That was tough to digest, especially for younger staffers and some senior managers. “We discovered a lot of introverts ... who had drifted into a pattern of communicating by e-mail,” Dockter says. But in less than four months, the simple directive has resulted in quicker problem-solving, better teamwork, and, best of all, happier customers. “Our relationship with PBD is much stronger,” says Cynthia Fitzpatrick of Crown Financial Ministries. “You can’t get to know someone through e-mail.”

While the BlackBerry has become standard armor for executives, a few maverick leaders are taking action to reduce e-mail use. The problem isn’t the distraction of spam or stuffed inboxes. Nor is it the potential for legal liability. The concern, say academics and management thinkers, is misinterpreted messages, as well as the degree to which e-mail has become a substitute for the nuanced conversations that are critical in the workplace. “Business has undervalued the social dimension of communication,” says Daniel Goleman, whose new book, *Social Intelligence*, examines the science behind interpersonal connections.

Recent research suggests that the perils of e-mail are greater than many assume. Justin Kruger, a professor at New York University’s Stern School of Business, has found that as few as 50% of users grasp the tone or intent of an e-mail and that most people vastly overestimate their ability to relay and comprehend messages accurately. Smiley faces and exclamation points just

add another layer of confusion. Misinterpretation is highest, Syracuse University professor Kristin Byron has discovered, when the e-mail comes from a boss.

### STUBBORN HABIT

Still, few companies have tried to tackle the problem of e-mail run amok. As International Association of Business Communicators President Julie Freeman notes, most corporate policies are “aimed at protecting the e-mail system rather than helping you be an effective communicator.” Many companies are adding collaborative tools such as communal Web pages (wikis). But the challenge of getting people to talk remains, especially among younger staffers for whom e-mail or text-messaging has become the default mode of discussion.

Such issues call for an overhaul of e-mail policies. Richard A. Chaifetz, CEO of Chicago-based employee assistance provider ComPsych Corp., has directed his 350 staffers to curb e-mail. “It should be used to send a large document to read, or when written communication is absolutely necessary,” says Chaifetz. Others urge banning it in sensitive situations such as major announcements, firings, job evaluations, and any form of criticism.

Another solution may come from the home of the Outlook e-mail system itself. In its 2007 version of Outlook, which goes on sale to corporate customers on Nov. 30, Microsoft Corp. has created a tool that elevates the humble telephone. Users can click on colleagues’ names, see if they’re available, and use the program to place a call directly.

While Dockter’s solution was decidedly less high-tech, it has already changed PBD’s culture. E-mail usage has dropped more than 80%, prompting improved communication and more one-on-one interaction between colleagues. Clients are so impressed that they have started to visit and call his staffers more often, too. The biggest peril now? Getting trapped in telephone tag.