

Just Say No - Addressing E-Mail Addiction (May 07)

Tegan Jones

A new addiction has taken hold of corporate America. At home, in their cars and even in meetings, business professionals can last barely 10 minutes without getting their fix. What they crave, of course, are BlackBerries, Treos and the other handheld devices that allow them to make phone calls, answer e-mails and schedule appointments anytime, anyplace. This obsession is so prevalent, many people have started calling their PDAs "CrackBerries."

Yet, a new survey by Robert Half Management Resources shows many senior executives think it's time for business professionals to get this monkey off their back.

Most of the respondents said they disapprove of employees who check their e-mails during meetings, with 31 percent of respondents saying this practice is never acceptable. Thirty-seven percent said it's OK to respond, as long as the message is urgent, and 23 percent said these professionals should excuse themselves from meetings to read or respond to messages.

Paul McDonald, Robert Half Management Resources executive director, said executives allow this practice, even though they disapprove of it, because it has become such an acceptable part of business culture.

"Mobile devices are an integral part of peoples' lives," he said. "In the business world, there are individuals who are attached to their BlackBerries and Treos, and it's difficult for them to put them down and focus on one task, which might be the business meeting at hand."

This obsession with constant communication is still business-oriented, however. In the competitive global marketplace, clients expect instant responses to their questions and concerns. If one professional doesn't help them fast enough, they can easily find another who will.

"It's a competitive world out there, and everyone's looking to make sure they serve their clients," McDonald said. "In order to get ahead and stay ahead, you need to respond on a just-in-time basis."

Still, professionals need to make a clearer distinction between messages that have 911 and 411 status, he said. According to eMarketer, a market research organization, the volume of global e-mails grew by 2.7 trillion last year.

This shows many businesspeople are using e-mail as their primary form of communication, but only a fraction of those e-mails are truly urgent, he explained.

This means distracted participants often are answering e-mails that are less important than the discussion taking place in the meeting they're attending. It's important for professionals to properly prioritize their efforts so that mission-critical conversations don't slip through their mental cracks, McDonald said.

"If professionals think they heard something but didn't because they're engaged with a very important e-mail, they may miss something that's important to the organization," he said.

McDonald also said survey respondents did recognize that in some large, seminar-style meetings, professionals don't need to be fully engaged at all times. But it was also clear many think workers take more liberty with answering e-mails than they should.

To address this issue, moderators and chairs of important meetings need to step up and let participants know when it is time to focus on the discussion at hand, McDonald said

Facilitators can enforce this policy by requiring meeting attendees to check their mobile devices at the door during mission-critical meetings or simply by asking people to refrain from using those devices during certain parts of the discussion.

Many moderators, however, might feel uncomfortable asking higher-ranking professionals to alter their behaviors, McDonald said.

"It's so acceptable that junior members chairing a committee with senior executives present may not feel comfortable making these statements," he said. "But making statements like, 'This part of the meeting is mission-critical — we are here to set policy, so we need your full attention during this part of the meeting,' really grabs people's attention, and you can have them focus on the points at hand."

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