

# Life Imitates Artlessness

## THE ELECTRONIC CRISIS JUNKIE

Those who know me are aware that, as a rule, I am not fond of e-mail. I've mentioned that fact a time or two from within the pages of this industry periodical which is celebrating its 20th anniversary. Despite the fact that e-mail is unmatched as a document transmittal and distribution system, I still contend that as today's go-to communications tool, it's a minefield. My objections are simple and direct.

Despite the fact that it moves at the speed of light, e-mail can waste an incredible amount of time. The back-and-forth, what-did-that-mean rigors of the simplest question turn 10 seconds into a typing class and a topic that deserves a genuine conversation into a doctoral dissertation. Equally frustrating is the flip-side of the complex treatise – when so little is being said that it feels like we are hosting a long-distance charades tournament. I once e-mailed my manager four different and mutually exclusive alternatives to a complicated problem so he could select an option. His response: "Yes." My request for clarification: "Which one?" His reply: "OK, maybe not."

E-mail operates exclusively in override/interrupt mode; nothing is more important than the last time that little chime chimed. We knowledge workers jump so quickly when the inbox beckons that we put Pavlov's dog to shame. The influx can be so steady that the speed of reply becomes more important than its content. If some external influence causes me to fall critically behind on my electronic correspondence (for instance, and this is purely hypothetical, if I were to accidentally fall asleep overnight) then I use a little game I call e-mail 3Ds to get caught up quickly. If you'd

like to try it, here's how it goes: Starting at the top of your unread mail list, and using your down-arrow key to navigate, click three times and yell, "Delete!" Hit the delete key and then claim never to have received that message. Tap your down-arrow three more times and yell, "Deny!" Use the reply to all option to say, "I don't think we can afford to get into this right now." Three more down-arrow taps and yell, "Delegate!" Select a random person in your organization and suggest that he or she take responsibility for whatever is requested in the mail. Repeat this process until your unread mail has been fully resolved.

Lastly, e-mail is so very easily misunderstood. I am constantly surprised by how frequently and thoroughly e-mail users, including yours truly, fall into the trap of misreading the tone and intent of e-mail messages.

Despite my obvious bad attitude on the subject, my point wasn't to complain about e-mail. I admit that my little mini-rant was therapeutic but it's really up there to foreshadow my actual topic, which is that the inroads of continuous electronic availability have reshaped our personal and professional lives. I now talk with executives in many disciplines whose waking (and sleeping and vacationing) hours are so dominated by electronic contact that they begin to see their job description as nothing more than being reachable enough to delete, deny or delegate. But now I worry that this continual barrage has created not only a new job description but also spawned a new life form: the electronic crisis junkie.

In the corporate world, there have always been crises and the prognosis for their continuation seems excellent. In response to this

important business need, there has always been a supply of workers who excel at emergency problem solving. Put a talented go-getter into the perfect storm and undeniably, an adrenaline jolt gets delivered to those who grab the helm. Just as two and two add up to four, there is a formula for good intentions gone too far: natural inclination + excess adrenaline = junkie. There are two notable differences between the regular crisis junkie and the new and improved e-junkie. First, e-junkies seem to need the fix more than the workplace does. Second, they always feel the need for warp speed. Gone are such subtle niceties as planning, strategy and thoughtful responses; the e-junkie feels compelled to repair your crisis faster than you can have it. Lightning-fast responses are the only way the e-junkie can be ready should the e-mail chime once again. The result is a series of e-mail exchanges like the one below.

As you might have noticed, an e-junkie can certainly feel and act like a problem but is actually more of a symptom. Our state of perpetual connectedness and the corresponding jump to light speed have many advantages. Admittedly, I do fully subscribe to the sales and marketing theory that the race typically goes to the swiftest. However, let's not lose sight of the fact that swift is not a standalone virtue. The most successful information professionals have found that swift goes hand-in-hand with well strategized, well prepared and well managed.

And finally, my most important point is...wait...what's that I hear? Is that the ding-donging of my inbox? Sorry, no more time for you! *To the cloud!*

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**Victim:** I think you should be aware that that we're having a tough time laying our hands on the SmithCo contract.

**Junkie:** Alert security! Make HR staff the doors and demand to see employee ID cards.

**Victim:** No, we think the file folder was misfiled last time someone had it out.

**Junkie:** Release the German Shepherds!

**Victim:** We don't have German Shepherds.

**Junkie:** Let's get some! Get purchasing on the line!

**Victim:** I don't think that's the problem.

**Junkie:** Are you saying we're too late?

**Victim:** No, I'm just telling you we have a filing issue.

**Junkie:** Get me the SmithCo file!

**Victim:** That's the one we can't find.

**Junkie:** I wish you people could make up your minds. Call an emergency staff meeting!

**Victim:** Everyone is gone for the day.

**Junkie:** Why do I have to do everything? We need better clocks! Where is purchasing?

**Victim:** Wait! We just found the SmithCo file!

**Junkie:** Thank God I got us through this one. From now on you need to get me involved earlier – don't wait until the very last minute or I can't promise that I can be this effective next time.