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The Offline Executive

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BY HENRY MINTZBERG AND PETER TODD

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Do you ever disconnect, even for just a few minutes? Think about the last time you used your “off button.” Was it at home over the weekend? On vacation? Or were you at the office? BlackBerrys, iPhones, Androids, iPads, and all their digital relatives are transforming our lives — for better and for worse. They are also changing the nature of how and when (and where) work gets done.

This new reality has profound implications for management, although studies on the topic have been surprisingly limited. We know that managers at all levels spend at least half their time collecting, receiving, and disseminating information. New technologies have extended the speed and breadth of this communication across vast distances. Yet studies going back a half century and more (long before e-mail) have made it clear that managing is characterized by high levels of variety, brevity, fragmentation, and interruption. Often to managers’ detriment, their attention is frequently diverted from one activity to another in their attempts to reconcile conflicting demands. The first of these studies, carried out by Sune Carlson and involving managing directors in Sweden in the late 1940s, found that

managers were inundated with reports. If they only knew what was to come.

Mobile computing seems to help managers cope with these distractions. Smartphones, for instance, allow them to attend to a variety of demands and leverage brief moments to complete minor tasks. But new technologies can also have unintended negative and harassing effects; managers need to understand the dangers of an overreliance on electronic communication.

Missing the Meaning

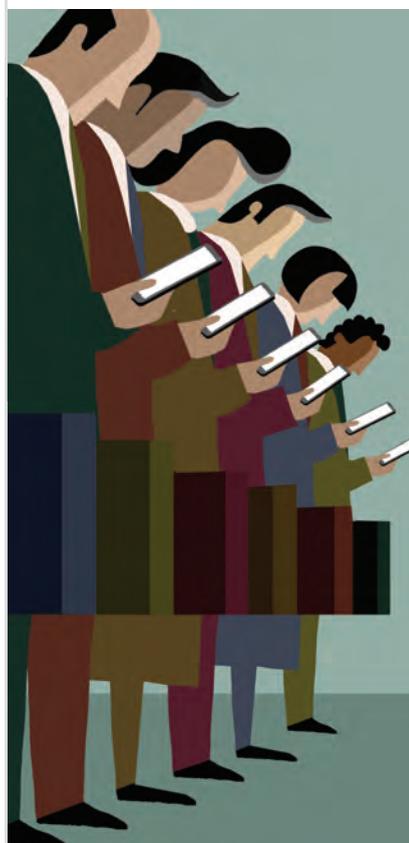
Managing is not a science; it is a subtle and nuanced practice, learned mostly on the job, through paying close attention to gestures and tone of voice. This “soft information” is an integral part of managing, and is gathered by talking and listening in meetings, during chance encounters, or on the phone. Using only a text message or an e-mail takes away the nuance that comes from seeing and hearing people, from exchanging points of view and working toward agreements. Information technology can and should expand your range of communication, but cannot be a substitute for interactions that build trust, share vision, and enhance community.

Indeed, managers who are in touch only through their keyboard are out of touch with the vast world beyond it. They risk substituting breadth for depth. Recent research shows that we may have more connections today, but fewer relationships. Facebook and LinkedIn can complement but not replace the personal interactions at the heart of managing effectively. Managers who believe that they can learn about their department through e-mail — rarely walking down the

hall, let alone getting on an airplane — may find themselves in trouble. They’ll gather the facts, but they may miss the meaning. And the increasing use of 140-character tweets to convey impressions of an organization or a person will likely result in an even greater loss of nuance.

New technologies can also aggravate the hectic pace and distraction inherent in managerial work, sometimes causing managers to behave unreasonably. For example, a manager may send a text message at 10:30 p.m. on a Sunday to announce a meeting at 8:30 a.m. on Monday. This and other more and more commonly accepted practices disrupt work–life balance, interrupt one’s ability to focus, and erode cognitive capabilities. The more often people feel compelled to check their e-mail or phone, the harder it is for them to focus on the task at hand.

This may also cause people to miss the big picture. Numerous



analyses of the 2008 financial crisis showed executives overly focused on responding quickly to the competition, getting bogged down in the specifics of a deal, and failing to see beyond the immediate future. By giving managers the illusion of control, the rapid flow of information through new technologies threatens to rob them of real control. As demands pile up, managing can become more frenetic and superficial.

Less Chatter, More Substance

The good news is, you can regain control. But to do so, you need to know the extent of your problem. After reading this article, you may wish to do the following exercise. First, tally the number of e-mails and texts you received during a given week. Second, calculate the portion of those messages for which some action on your part was required. Third, calculate your send/receive ratio (the number of messages you sent divided by those you received). Finally, look at your origination rate (the percentage of sent messages that you initiated, rather than messages that originated elsewhere to which you replied).

In one of the lightest workweeks of the year, just after New Year's, one of the authors conducted this exercise. He received 294 e-mails, not counting those caught by spam filters. Only 46 (about 15 percent) required a response, 107 (about one-third) went unread (because either the subject line said it all, the information was obsolete, or he regarded it as junk mail), and the rest were "for information" but could require significant time and attention down the road. He sent 64 e-mails, or one for each 4.6 received, giving him a send/receive ratio of 0.22. Of the messages sent, 33 were responses to

some of the 294 messages received (a little more than 10 percent), 13 were messages received and forwarded to someone else to handle (about 5 percent), and 18 were messages he initiated (6 percent of the total received).

Assume that the 46 action items took an average of 10 minutes each to handle, the 18 messages he initiated took 15 minutes each, and he spent a minute each to prioritize the 294 incoming messages. A full 17 hours was consumed. In one of the lightest e-mail weeks of the year, almost half of a regular 40-hour week was spent handling e-mail! And if we think about this in the context of the approximately 247 billion e-mails sent daily (as of 2010, according to the market research firm Radicati Group Inc.), the scope and potential cost of the problem become more apparent.

Using the data you gather about your own e-mail habits, you can take measures such as the following to decrease the chatter and accentuate the substance:

- **Reduce the volume.** The more traffic you put on a network and the more people you involve, the more messages you should expect in return. Hold back from sending some messages until you have considered and reconsidered whether you really have something to say (and who needs to hear it).

- **Segment your e-mail.** You might have multiple e-mail addresses: one broadly promoted and monitored by an assistant, who has been trained to prioritize and reply on your behalf; another open only to those in selected e-mail categories (like clients and colleagues); and a third for a small circle of contacts, friends, and family. Some may have a fourth, used for purchasing online, that is likely to generate spam.

- **Use e-mail tools.** Although few people take full advantage of these features, most e-mail client programs have built-in mechanisms, such as filters and rules, for regulating and organizing information flow. Status messages such as "out of office" notices can manage others' expectations. As electronic assistants, such as Apple's Siri, increase in sophistication, they will extract underlying tasks from e-mails and gather the information needed to complete them.

- **Create individual downtime.** Managing your e-mail is one thing, but sometimes you need to escape from it. You can try the strategy used by Danah Boyd of Microsoft, who periodically declares an e-mail sabbatical and ceases all electronic communication (she recommends doing it for a minimum of two weeks). If that's too extreme, you can choose to respond only within certain windows of time in the day, and block out "offline" hours in your calendar. During these times, you can turn on your "out of office" message to let people know that your response may be delayed...for the 10 percent of messages that may actually need a response.

- **Create organizational downtime.** Nathan Zeldes, formerly of Intel, has been a thought leader in this area, cataloguing and promoting ideas such as organizational "quiet time," e-mail quotas, message chargeback and accounting systems, and limited-access e-mail servers. Volkswagen AG has stopped its BlackBerry servers from routing e-mails when employees are off-shift (this applies to union members in Germany, and senior management is exempt); other companies are declaring "no e-mail" periods over important holidays; still others, such as

Paris-based IT services company Atos SA, are contemplating banning the internal use of e-mail altogether.

- **Make a fresh start.** Those who feel overwhelmed, like *Wired* columnist and Harvard Law professor Lawrence Lessig, have sometimes declared “e-mail bankruptcy.” Out with the old e-mail address and in with the new one. Starting over, you can develop better habits in sending, receiving, and responding to messages, while severing connections with those whom you prefer to leave behind.

- **Power down.** Turn off the devices. In our leadership development programs at McGill University, we remind executive attendees to step back, and reflect thoughtfully on their experiences. But that doesn’t just happen; you have to make it part of your management routine.

These steps require saying no to forces that assume that you will always be available. As the CEO of a major Canadian high-tech company once said about e-mail: “You can never escape. You can’t go anywhere to contemplate, or think.” But that doesn’t have to be true. You have a choice: Will you control technology so that it works for you, or will you let it undermine your practice of management? It all depends on how much attention you are willing to pay to your habits: the way they are now, and the way they ought to be. And remember, there’s always an off button. +

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