

Lost in Translation

ALISON J. STEIN

Alison J. Stein is an award-winning writer who serves as the culinary travel editor for *About.com*, a New York Times Company-owned Web magazine for original ideas and advice. Stein grew up in New York City and, as she puts it, “ate her way through its great neighborhoods.” Passionate about traveling, eating, and writing, she revels in what she regards as the ideal life. Her writing has appeared in many publications, including *Business Week*, *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Magazine*, *Glamour*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Money*, *Mother Jones*, *The Smart Set*, the *Toronto Star*, and *USA Weekend*. Stein is also the author of *(Like) Riding a Bike: On Learning as an Adult* (2011), a book about how at nearly thirty-four years of age she finally decided to learn to ride a bicycle. Her writing has been anthologized in *Best Women’s Travel Writing 2010*, and you can follow her on Twitter.

In “Lost in Translation,” first published on *Inc.com* on September 1, 2005, Stein extols the virtues of face-to-face communication over e-mail.

WRITING TO DISCOVER: *Is it better to meet people face-to-face or simply send an e-mail, or does it depend on what you have to say? How do you decide? What are the advantages and disadvantages of meeting or e-mailing?*

When employees report to work on Fridays at Roberts Golden Consulting in San Francisco, they’re greeted with a gentle reminder from president Sara Roberts: Remember, today is No E-mail Friday.

From Monday through Thursday at this management consultancy, as at most companies, e-mail reigns as the primary form of communication—whether with colleagues, clients, or suppliers. But on the fifth day of the workweek, Roberts’s employees give their keyboards a rest. Too much e-mail, says Roberts, makes it harder to build rapport, and that threatens to derail effective business relationships. “People hide behind e-mail,” she says. “For just one day a week, I want us to pick up the phone or talk to someone face-to-face.”

Uneasiness about e-mail is almost as old as e-mail itself. But until now, most of the complaints have focused on things like e-mail overload, or the damage and embarrassment caused when messages go to the wrong people, or the need, for legal reasons, to be careful about what is put into writing. But those concerns just scratch the surface. New research indicates that overreliance on e-mail can degrade an organization’s interpersonal communications. If it’s not used properly, instead of making your company quicker and more efficient, too much text-based communicating can actually make it stupider.

To be sure, e-mail is not inherently evil. But it can be the kiss of death when it's used to communicate anything sensitive, important, or complicated, says Ron McMillan, who is co-author of *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High* and who spent 10,000

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hours observing how companies nationwide communicate. As text messages fly between desktops, laptops, and hand-helds, McMillan says, they arrive without the rich stew of nonverbal information, such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and eye gaze, that we typically rely on to figure out what someone really means. One study by UCLA psychology professor Albert Mehrabian found that 55 percent of meaning in an interaction comes from facial and body language and 38 percent comes from vocal inflection. Only 7 percent of an interaction's meaning is derived from the words themselves. Since e-mail is, by definition, just the words themselves, it's more easily misunderstood than an actual conversation. Yet managers and employees rely increasingly on text messages for nuanced conversations that really ought to be handled face-to-face, or at least voice-to-voice, says McMillan.

The results range from the merely comical to the truly horrifying, as Sara Roberts observed during a 10-year career in corporate America prior to founding her company. In one case, a colleague interacted on a near daily basis with a client over e-mail—without ever figuring out whether the person was male or female.

More seriously, text messages often touch off needless conflict. At one company, Roberts witnessed an explosive turf battle sparked when one employee left another off a "reply all" e-mail chain. Battles started over e-mail often rage longer, and more dramatically, than face-to-face disputes. People tend to be less inhibited over e-mail and more prone to conflict, according to Barry Wellman at the University of Toronto. Indeed, several studies comparing e-mail with face-to-face communication found that e-mail was more blunt and included more swearing and insults. "Everyone has an e-mail that they wish they hadn't sent," says Wellman.

That's why the 40 employees at MSCO, a marketing firm based in Purchase, N.Y., are not allowed to use e-mail or their BlackBerrys if they plan to criticize one another. It's just too easy for an exchange to escalate out of control, says CEO Mark Stevens. A few months ago, one employee complained about another's work performance via BlackBerry—and copied four others, including Stevens, on the message. "The person doing the criticizing was two offices down from the person being criticized, so what was that about?" wondered Stevens, who dropped what he was doing, sat down with the e-critic, and let him know that what he'd done was inappropriate.

Of course, there's no reason to go office to office looking deep into the eyes of every staffer whenever you send an e-mail. But periodic in-person

ly evil. But it can be the kiss of anything sensitive, important, or is co-author of *Crucial Conversations: Why We Struggle to Talk Effectively* and who spent 10,000 hours observing how companies worldwide communicate. As text messages fly between desktops, laptops, and hand-helds, McMillan says, they arrive without the rich stew of verbal information, such as tone and gaze, that we typically rely on to understand. One study by UCLA psychologists found that 55 percent of meaning in face-to-face body language and 38 percent of an interaction's meaning comes from nonverbal cues. Since e-mail is, by definition, more easily misunderstood than an actual meeting, employees rely increasingly on technology that really ought to be handled in person, says McMillan.

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MSCO, a marketing firm based in New York, found that employees use e-mail or their BlackBerrys if they don't have an easy way to escalate a problem. A few months ago, one employee sent a message via BlackBerry—and copied it to his manager. "The person doing the criticizing, the person being criticized, so what was the person who copied what he was doing, sat down with the person who he'd done was inappropriate. The manager went office to office looking deep into the person who sent an e-mail. But periodic in-person

check-ins will let you know when you need to do some damage control. In fact, if you make the time for old-fashioned face-to-face encounters on a regular basis, e-mail and IM actually may strengthen your working relationships, says University of Toronto's Wellman. "The face-to-face world and the bit-to-bit world can fit together," he says.

JoAnne Yates, a professor at MIT's Sloan School of Management who studies e-mail usage in the workplace, advises people to use electronic communication only to transmit and confirm simple information, and have actual conversations for anything that could possibly be sensitive. At the same time, flexibility is key. Sara Roberts, for example, knows she can't force her employees to ignore a message from a client who expects an immediate written response—even on No E-mail Friday. The point isn't to achieve perfect adherence, she says, but rather to remind people of the importance of communicating face-to-face. "No E-mail Friday helps us to remember we really could go over to that person sitting right over there and collaborate more," she says. In a wired world, it's worth remembering that there's still no technology more powerful than an actual meeting of minds.

ALL E-MAIL (ALL THE TIME)

Sometimes, face-to-face communication simply is not possible. That's the case at Alpine Access, a provider of outsourced call-center services based in Golden, Colo. Senior executives at the company log zero face-to-face time with their 7,500 employees—including call-center agents, managers, and trainers, nearly all of whom work from their homes scattered across the country. Hiring, training, day-to-day management, and strategic planning all are handled electronically or over the phone. "There's no opportunity to look into someone's eyes to make sure they understand what's being said," says co-founder Jim Ball. So the company has developed a number of practices to compensate—practices that will boost the effectiveness of e-mail at any company.

Clarity Is Everything

Important messages, such as word that everyone needs to work harder to meet a monthly target, are vetted by several people for everything from grammar to nuance.

Trust but Verify

When employees get an e-mail, they're required to acknowledge receipt and are immediately offered the opportunity to ask questions. Managers check back regularly to ensure that employees are on track and not missing any critical info.

Know When Not to Type

For truly difficult conversations—such as performance reviews—forget the bits and bytes. “You can be just as empathetic over the phone as you would be in person,” Ball insists. “It’s more difficult, but it can be done.”

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT THE READING

1. In paragraph 2, Stein quotes Sara Roberts as saying, “People hide behind e-mail.” What does she mean?
2. In paragraph 4, Stein reports that Professor Mehrabian found “only 7 percent of an interaction’s meaning is derived from the words themselves.” Does that statistic seem accurate to you? Why or why not?
3. Stein writes in paragraph 6 “text messages often touch off needless conflict.” What evidence does she provide for her claim?
4. According to Stein in paragraph 6, there are several studies that “found that e-mail was more blunt and included more swearing and insults.” Why might that be true?
5. In paragraph 10, Stein cites the example of Alpine Access in Golden, Colorado, where face-to-face communication is impossible. Assess the advice Alpine Access offers its employees to improve e-mail effectiveness. Do you think the company’s advice could help improve communication? Explain.

WRITING SUGGESTIONS: DEBATING THE ISSUE

1. Sherry Turkle notes, “Teenagers grew up in a culture of distraction. They remember that their parents were on cell phones when they were pushed on swings as toddlers. Now, their parents text at the dinner table and don’t look up from their BlackBerries when they pick them up after school. From the moment this generation met technology, it was the competition” (2). David Carr makes a similar point with anecdotes in “Keep Your Thumbs Still While I’m Talking to You” (p. 496). Write an essay in which you analyze the effects of technology on family interactions. In your experience, is Turkle’s portrayal correct? How have you seen families (your own or others) manage the intrusion that technology represents? To what extent does it even need to be managed?
2. Turkle writes, “We re-create ourselves as online personae in games or in a virtual world and give ourselves new bodies, homes, jobs, and romances. Yet, suddenly, in the half-light of virtual community, we may feel utterly alone. As we distribute ourselves, do we abandon ourselves?” (6). Write an essay in which you explore the question of personal identity today. How does the presence of social media affect one’s identity? Can a distinction be fairly made between one’s online presence and one’s personal presence, or have the two become irrevocably blurred? Is it possible to have an online presence that is completely divorced from one’s real life, or vice versa?