

## COMMUNICATIONS

# Don't be a Blackberry Fool

**David Winders** asks if mobile e-mail is having a detrimental effect on the decision-making capability of junior managers.

It's the holiday season again, and offices across the country are full of managers getting back from their annual break in Tuscany, or the Dordogne, to cries of "There are 300 e-mails in my inbox. I can't talk to you until I have sorted them out. I'll get back to you early next week." Not only do they rush around the week before they go away, clearing items up before their holiday, but also the e-mail situation ruins the best part of the week afterwards as well. Then, of course, comes the holiday itself. In short, their annual break of two weeks turns into a full month of dubious productivity.

Some would argue that you are really sad if you have a Blackberry or other mobile e-mail device and take it away with you, spending every hour by the pool getting repetitive strain injury of the thumbs, as you keep up to date with what is going on in the office. We all deserve a holiday, and in fact people who don't take holiday, or take their work with them on holiday, are destined for burn-out or ill health. Is the e-mail culture what in fact makes it all so much worse?

A senior strategy director for a large financial services group mentioned to me the other day that she thought e-mail, and particularly mobile e-mail, was having a detrimental effect on the decision-making capability of junior managers, and ultimately for senior managers as the younger generations progress up the career ladder. Her point was that people rarely make decisions today themselves but either e-mail "up the line" for a decision, or propose a decision and then distribute it widely in order to spread the accountability, presumably on the basis that "I copied you in so if you had a problem with it you should have commented." The passing of decisions upwards has a detrimental effect on senior managers because, if they are not careful, their staff reverse-delegate decision making, submerging the manager in day-to-day detail, restricting his or her ability to manage



the bigger Picture.

Recent surveys have reported that two million e-mails are sent every minute in the UK. Most managers receive well in excess of fifty mails a day and that is being conservative; perhaps we should run a competition in LeasingWorld to see who can claim the most e-mails received in a working day!

The mobile e-mail Culture is growing, with e-mail on portable devices doubling since 2004. The use of Blackberry-type devices has impacted the way of life of many a corporate environment. The development of a real-time messaging culture has had both positive and negative effects. The ability for field forces to respond to customer demand, and shorten cycle times for service and product delivery, has to be a benefit; no more waiting to get back to the office, or to a fixed broadband line back at home, or waiting for the laptop to boot sitting in the car in order to lodge that proposal. For the mobile professional, one cannot argue against these things but are they as important for office-based staff?

Real time messaging impacts us all in many ways; it creates an expectation of an instant reply creating a culture in which people spend time in meetings or workshops dealing with mail rather than listening and contributing with their full attention. This sort of behaviour is seen by some as quite rude as well. It seems that the more senior you are the more acceptable it is when in meetings, to deal with e-mails, take calls,

or walk out of gatherings spontaneously, to resolve a presumably more important issue. This potentially leads to junior staff feeling that this is the way to behave and imitate this unproductive behaviour themselves.

Socially, real time messaging has an effect. The term "crackberry" has been coined to describe an individual who has an unhealthy addiction to mobile e-mail. In the United States, 13 percent of male users and 16 percent of women consider they are addicted to their devices, checking their mail all day long, including in bed. These levels of stress and total immersion in work surely cannot be healthy for anyone?

E-mail when used appropriately is obviously a productive tool, so how we manage it is the key to ensure that it delivers value, without creating waste.

#### GOOD E-MAIL PRACTICES

Developing the right corporate culture where carbon copying mails for political reasons or diffusing accountability is frowned upon and brought to their offender's attention during performance reviews and one-to-one meetings.

The re-introduction of good business courtesy where meetings are given focus, with mobiles and e-mail device use seen as bad form.

The use of time management for e-mail processing: individuals should put aside a set time, once or twice a day, to answer mails in an organised and consistent way.

Be very careful how one writes an e-mail message. The written word is much colder than face-to-face voice interaction and before one knows it a spat of e-mails can easily result in offence or confusion creating angst, stress, unpleasantness and wasted time.

If a real-time messaging culture develops, be able to step back and ask is this really adding value to the business and its customers.

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