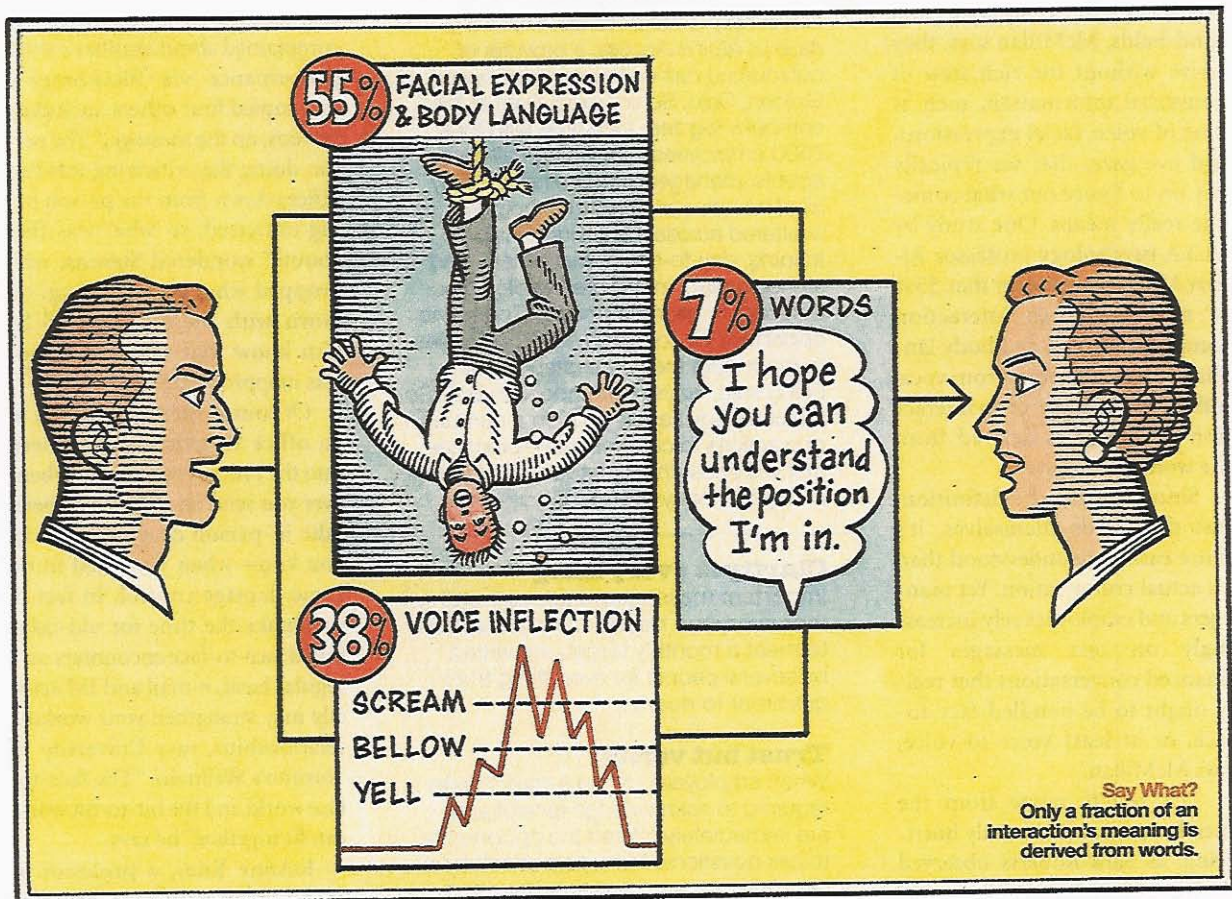


HandsOn

managing



Lost in translation

Thanks to e-mail, BlackBerrys, and text messaging, the face-to-face encounter is becoming a dying art. Here's why you should revive it

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 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% of meaning in an interaction comes from facial and body language and 38% comes from vocal inflection. Only 7% 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



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 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. —A.S.W.

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."



based in Purchase, N.Y., are not allowed to use e-mail or their BlackBerry 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 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 ex-

pects 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.

—Alison Stein Wellner