

Enough Email

by Joshua Stein, Joshua Stein PLLC



After two decades of ever increasing use of email, are we starting to see a backlash, a move away from email?

I've certainly seen it. Aside from dealing with the sheer volume of email, the business world seems to have become somewhat frustrated at the limitations of this communications medium.

For some things, it's great. But for discussions that require thought; raise complexities; or require a lot of back and forth, it just doesn't work well. I'm seeing people — including me — pick up the phone more. You can often accomplish more in a quick phone call than in a series of 35 back and forth emails.

The new etiquette seems to require that before calling someone to discuss something, it's a good idea to email ahead to plan the call: When is a good time? Is it okay if we talk by phone? Without this groundwork, a phone call can come as a shock. So the caller feels he or she needs to pave the way, ask permission.

If a discussion has any sensitivity at all, email creates a much higher risk of misunderstanding than a phone call. Email is closer to the written word. The written word has a harsh edge to it, a directness, which a nuanced telephone conversation doesn't.

If I find myself carefully choosing my words in an email to try to communicate just the right nuance about something sensitive, I'll often stop and pick up the phone.

Likewise, if I need to ask a question where different answers will prompt different further questions or comments, I've learned to stop writing a long complex email and, again, get on the phone. It works.

Too often people working on a deal circulate a draft; get written comments; circulate another draft; circulate competing issues lists; circulate competing markups; and then circulate comments on other people's drafts and issues lists — all through a long stream of emails that become almost impossible to manage and often cross paths in cyberspace.

The process sometimes feels like a tennis game. You suffer a "foul" if you don't reply to an email fast enough. You might be guilty of holding up the deal.

It's a process that does sometimes work and helps get deals closed at a velocity inconceivable not too long ago. But it also allows issues and loose ends to linger, rather than resolving them and moving forward. At some point in the process, it



makes sense for the various people involved to sit down in a room — or, very much second best, get on a conference call — and finish the discussion rather than just keep hitting the email ball over the net.

Email has become so much the norm for nearly all business communications that if you receive an email but don't quite know what to say, it just sits and before long it falls into the abyss and never gets answered. The idea of giving the sender a phone call doesn't seem immediately obvious.

In those cases — when the sender expected a response but didn't get one — or the recipient doesn't quite know what to say — one person or the other should think about getting on the phone and helping the entire discussion escape out of the email morass. A phone call can be a great way to move things along. If you usually deal with someone by email, though, then a sudden switch to speaking by telephone can feel like running into someone in a place where you didn't really expect to see him or her, maybe even a place where you weren't supposed to be.

If email has become the focus of most business communications, but also the source of so much frustration, should we expect anything to change in our use of email? I certainly see no sign of anything replacing it — not even the telephone or in-person meetings. But I do expect the business world to move to a more organized and less granular communications medium at some point in the medium-term future.

A replacement for email would still involve computers and the Internet but offer a more organized way of communicating. Perhaps Facebook offers a model — a single web page where you can see all your relationships and communications with everyone — but the business world would demand something much less cluttered and less open to "junk." A shared communications medium of this type might allow all participants to see an entire conversation, and all related documents and web pages, in a highly organized way, without the need to figure out the history of a long series of individual email messages. Anything like this wouldn't work unless everyone started using it, just as what happened with Facebook. It will need to become just as universal as email. And it could.

*Joshua Stein
Joshua Stein PLLC
59 East 54th Street, Suite 22
New York, NY 10022
Tel: 212-688-3300
joshua@joshuastein.com
www.joshuastein.com*