

# Missed Connections

E-mail, cell phones,  
and the wireless Web are great,  
but are we losing the ability  
to talk face-to-face?

By Mildred S. Myers

Does our ability to constantly send messages to each other increase our understanding of each other? Does bridging barriers of time and space also bridge emotional or political differences or different values? Sometimes I wonder whether people who contact each other mostly by e-mail become uncomfortable if they actually meet face-to-face and have to carry on extended real-time conversations, complete with physical and vocal nuances.

Close personal relationships normally mean that people want to “sense” each other in as many ways as they can. E-mail and cell-phone texting may be better than no contact for lovers or family members separated by a continent or an ocean, but people in such circumstances still talk on the phone in times of great

joy or sadness and still try to come together whenever possible.

That emotional dimension, or lack of it, may explain why my consulting business is booming with clients who, essentially, want me to teach them how to operate more comfortably in communication situations that require live conversation with people who are important to their business success. An engineer who is now CEO of a start-up needs to learn how to talk with the upper-level executives of potential customer companies. He’s accustomed to interacting (largely by e-mail) with other technical people about technical problems, but he’s uncomfortable talking with other executives about anything other than technology. Another start-up’s CEO, also an engineer, is frustrated by the

---

*MILDRED S. MYERS is principal lecturer in business communications at Carnegie Mellon University.*



need to motivate employees and respond to their issues; he can answer their questions about technology and software, but he doesn't know how to respond to their unhappiness about an organizational structure he imposed upon them. Technology executives who testify before regulatory or legislative bodies or face interviews with news reporters criticize their questioners for their lack of technological savvy, but they don't know how to communicate their messages in words and images that their listeners can understand—a situation that frustrates both parties.

There are two factors to note here: First, in-person interaction remains necessary, despite technology that makes it ever more possible to cross communication boundaries of space and time. Second, many of the people who are asking for professional help in communicating face-to-face are IT specialists—people who spend their days developing Internet switching systems or medical-information devices or patrolling the Internet for viruses and security violations.

Why is this kind of face-to-face interaction still so important? Why are so many corporate executives paying me to teach them how to talk to their employees, their customers, governmental regulators, journalists?

Speaking of journalists, why do reporters still travel all over the country and the world to interview someone in person rather than do it by e-mail? The nature of the medium—the fact that e-mail is not real-time, not spontaneous—makes it inappropriate for interviews; reporters don't want interviewees to deliver honed and polished written statements in answer to their questions. They want real-time responses, and they want to see and hear the person making them.

Vocal inflections and body language reinforce or detract from the speaker's credibility; without them, a reporter finds it difficult to judge whether interviewees are telling the truth and really believe what they are saying. One reporter tells me of the "texture" of a real-time, live interview, referring to layers of meaning and understanding that are generated when people interact face-to-face. Such situations are multi-dimensional; text interactions are not.

For the same reasons, a venture capitalist deciding whether or not to fund a start-up, a customer considering an alliance with that start-up, a congressional committee investigating a consumer-safety issue, and employees of a company that is being merged or acquired all want to meet with the CEO

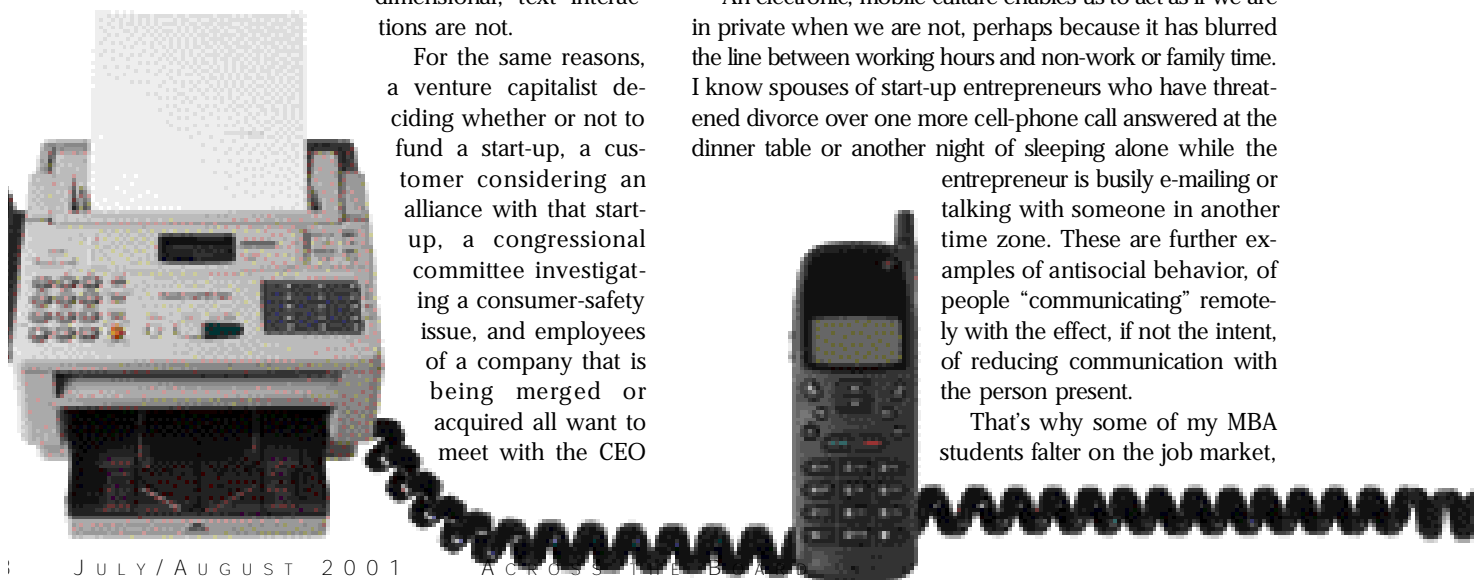
in person. They need and want the texture and layers of meaning that are possible only with the full range of vocal and physical cues provided by real-time interactions. Without that texture, without those layers, it is harder to form a clear picture of a CEO or the company he represents. Most of us are reluctant to commit our money or hearts without that picture.

The answer to the second issue—why professionals who spend much of their lives interacting via computer dominate my list of "teach me how to talk" clients—seems obvious: The more you communicate via remote means, the rustier your real-time, one-on-one skills get. But what about all those people we see and hear every day, talking on their cell phones in the car, on the bus, on the train, on the sidewalk, in the grocery store, in restaurants? Apparently they have no problem talking to whomever it is they're always talking to! I offer an explanation that strengthens rather than weakens my contention that connecting electronically is no way to forge or strengthen relationships.

I overhear two kinds of conversations. In one kind, the personal connection that provides texture to the relationship is already there. Talking on one's cell phone to one's spouse or best friend is simply a technological extension of talking in person. The relationship already exists; the speakers already have the texture they need, because they know the person and can fill in the "body language" that accompanies the speaker's words. The other kind of conversation is the routine logistical call: "I'm delayed at the airport, so I won't make the meeting; tell Tom he'll have to go for me," or—in this day of everyone being on the run—"What? The VC wants to know if I can meet this afternoon? OK, I'm on my way to the appointment with the potential customer, but then I can go from there to the VC's office." These calls are not about communicating meaning or building relationships or engendering trust—they are primarily talking timetables or real-time versions of "meeting maker" software programs, useful and necessary in a global environment when business hours in one country may be dinner hour in another, but hardly a sound way to forge and temper business or personal relationships.

An electronic, mobile culture enables us to act as if we are in private when we are not, perhaps because it has blurred the line between working hours and non-work or family time. I know spouses of start-up entrepreneurs who have threatened divorce over one more cell-phone call answered at the dinner table or another night of sleeping alone while the entrepreneur is busily e-mailing or talking with someone in another time zone. These are further examples of antisocial behavior, of people "communicating" remotely with the effect, if not the intent, of reducing communication with the person present.

That's why some of my MBA students falter on the job market,



## Don't Talk to Me

Until now, the whole point of cell phones has been that you can call anyone, anytime, from anywhere, with a reasonable expectation that the person you call may answer, anytime, from anywhere—you will *talk* to the person. When you send an e-mail message, you know you will *not* talk to the person. However, as the wireless web develops, more of us will be able to send and receive e-mail with our cell phones. Already people are “texting”—using their cell phones to send text messages—instead of using them to talk in real time.

Businesspeople are adopting text messaging as another tool for “multitasking,” allowing people to contact each other when one or both are in a meeting. “His phone vibrates when he gets my message,

he quickly punches in a response, and no one in the meeting is disturbed,” reports one satisfied user. As more cell phones provide wireless Web access, businesspeople can and do use them to check and answer e-mail while sitting in restaurants and in traffic. Salespeople and account representatives visiting a customer’s office can dial into the home office’s computer and give the customer an up-to-the-minute report on an order’s status.

But such ease of transmission can also create problems. Businesspeople who have been in meetings in which someone was receiving and replying to text messages disagree with the texter who insists that “no one is disturbed” when he sends a message to someone in a meeting and that person responds. They complain that the texter is distracted from

the business at hand, and the other participants resent it.

Note the irony here: The growing popularity of “texting” suggests that people are now using cell-phone technology to delay and distance themselves not only from the conversation that the cell phone makes possible, but also from in-person communication situations such as ongoing meetings. Is there some cause-and-effect here? As the technology increasingly enables us to make contact or be contacted anywhere, at any time, as technology blurs the distinction between “private” and “public,” between “off-duty” time and work or “on-duty” time, and between electronic and in-person interactions, are we now beginning to operate as if we are in private when we are not? —M.S.M.

in the interview process: If you spend all of your time interacting with your laptop computer, if you sit in class reading and writing e-mail or checking your investments instead of engaging with the professor or your fellow students, you’re acting as if you are operating in a glass bubble, with no responsibility to anyone else. The more you do that, the more you reinforce your isolation, and the less you are able to interact responsibly and responsively with others, even when you want to.

It’s the same reason that the CEO of an Internet-based start-up needs me to teach him how to introduce a new organizational structure to his employees. He’s comfortable working it out by himself, mapping it out on his computer, and then either e-mailing it to the employees or presenting it to them as a PowerPoint presentation: another form of carefully constructed, formal *fait accompli*. He doesn’t know how to discuss his ideas interactively.

That’s why software engineers charged with protecting computer users from viruses ask how to teach their customers what to watch for and what to do. Their knowledge of software and their technological expertise provide no protection if their customers don’t understand the warnings and guidelines they provide. That’s why the CEO of a manufacturer of high-tech medical devices asks me to design and teach “managerial communication” courses for his company’s supervisors, middle managers, and top executives. That’s why my colleague who found himself in the middle of a bitter e-mail “war” between two program administrators took them to lunch together. Forced to interact socially, they quickly found a mutually acceptable solution and finished the meal on good terms.

Both electronic culture and mobile culture reinforce isolationist tendencies, and the wireless Internet, once it’s perfected, will intensify such behavior. The more we rely on

e-mail or cellular texting to transmit and receive messages, the more opportunities we have to read those messages or surf the Web anywhere we happen to be, anytime we feel like doing so, the less need we feel to bother about even minimally polite interactions with those around us.

A veteran CEO whose executive experience largely predates today’s tele-technology knows that “communication” requires more than an electronic link between senders and receivers of messages. Invited to address my MBA students in a “distance learning” program taught via videoconferencing, he asks to have extensive information about the students (their names, professional positions, geographical locations) and about the course content prior to his session, so that he can demonstrate by example that—in his words—“effective communication requires relationship building.” He adds: “It will be interesting to me to see how well such ‘connecting’ is possible by ‘distance technology.’”

He knows that electronic connection is not the same as human interaction: The more comfortable we become in our bubbles, the more tempting it is to avoid the messiness and slowness involved in person-to-person interactions—until a professional or personal exigency forces us to do so and we discover that our communication skills have atrophied. This trend is great for my consulting business, but it portends tough days ahead for societal institutions ranging from families to businesses to nations. Ford and Firestone executives can’t testify before congressional investigators by e-mail, and if Ariel Sharon and Yasir Arafat negotiate a peace settlement, it won’t be by cellular texting. ♦

