

## It's 11 P.M. Why Are People E-Mailing Me?

**And why am I replying? High-tech gadgets keep people corresponding well into the night, but jury's out on what it means for a career**

**STEPHANIE WHITTAKER**  
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL  
JULY 2, 2008 AT 8:31 AM EDT

Just three years ago, Lori Cohen would log on to her computer late in the evening and fire off e-mails to co-workers, then head for bed. There was no need to check for responses until the following morning.

Now, however, when Ms. Cohen sends late-night missives, she often doesn't even get a chance to close her e-mail program before a message alert signals that a reply has arrived.

"It's the same on the weekend," says Ms. Cohen, a marketing manager at Pazazz Printing in Montreal, adding that it's not unusual to receive six or seven e-mails between midnight and 6 a.m. "People used to wait until Monday to respond." Not any longer.

Doesn't anybody sleep any more?



[Enlarge Image](#)

Montreal lawyer Arnold Cohen is no stranger to late-night BlackBerry e-mail exchanges. "These days, I'm surprised when I don't get instant responses. Technology has given us this expectation and it becomes self-perpetuating." (*JOHN MORSTAD FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL*)



Blame globalization, blame technology, blame conditioning, blame impatience, blame a fear of how you'll be regarded in your job if you don't respond immediately: When it comes to modern communication, anecdotal evidence suggests that more people have shifted into late-night gear, boosting the amount of two-way e-mail traffic on the information highway well after traditional work hours.

All that after-hours electronic communication, especially with the use of BlackBerrys, is raising issues about overtime compensation. It came to the forefront recently with a dispute at ABC News over payment for writers who check their BlackBerrys after hours. Closer to home, the devices have become a bargaining issue among unions.

Claude Balthazard, director of human resources excellence for the Toronto-based Human Resources Professionals Association, says the issue is growing because, in the past, such devices were used mostly by senior managers, who expected that being on-call after hours was part of their job. Now that unionized employees are being issued personal digital assistants, questions are being raised about what that means for their working status after hours.

While there's some disagreement on whether hitting the reply button around midnight is good for the career, it's a growing phenomenon - and for various reasons.

### **HIGH-TECH HABITS**

Ms. Cohen, for one, believes wireless devices that allow people to respond to e-mail anywhere any time are one reason for the acceleration in e-mail response time.

That notion is borne out by Montreal lawyer Arnold Cohen (no relation), who says he is always connected to his BlackBerry and is no stranger to late-night e-mail. He believes the technology has boosted people's expectation of immediate response.

"It used to be that I would get an e-mail from someone during his commute home in Chicago or California and he'd be pleasantly surprised if I responded right away," says Mr. Cohen, who specializes in financing and insolvency law in the Montreal office of law firm Ogilvy Renault LLP. "Things have changed. These days, I'm surprised when I don't get instant responses.

"Technology has given us this expectation and it becomes self-perpetuating."

Mr. Cohen says his practice of responding to e-mails regardless of the time is part of his "code of conduct" for meeting client expectations. "Unless I'm absolutely out of touch, such as on vacation, I work at responding to e-mail within an hour until 11 p.m."

### **IT'S A SMALLER WORLD**

It's 11 p.m.; do you know where your colleague is?

The new reality of business - globalization - means people are working virtually with others in different time zones.

Consider Pedro Gregorio, an engineer who leads a team in the Montreal office of Immersion Corp., a high-tech company based in San Jose, Calif. He spends several hours in the evening a few times a week e-mailing and teleconferencing with his overseas team.

"I'm working in a global environment, and my people are front-line people," he says. "We're working with client engineers who can't afford to wait a day or two for our attention. There really isn't any other way other than doing the work in the evening. I didn't do e-mail in the evenings until I started to work with people in other time zones."

On one occasion, however, he recalls a colleague in South Korea expressing concern about the hours he was keeping. "I started doing real-time responses for him because I was concerned that he needed immediate responses from me to satisfy our customers.

"I always made sure he got very timely responses, regardless of the time of day or evening. And I noticed that he would respond immediately. He mentioned to a fellow colleague that he was worried I was working too hard at about the same time I told another colleague that I thought he was working too hard."

The more people log on outside of work hours, the more others expect it, Mr. Gregorio adds. "I received a work related e-mail one Sunday morning and, by Sunday afternoon, the sender had e-mailed me again, asking why I hadn't responded to the morning message.

"In our culture, people are obsessed with time."

## **LIFESTYLE BALANCE**

For some, late night e-mailing is simply the new normal - it's what they do, and they don't mind.

Mitch Joel says he handles e-mail late into the evenings without feeling burdened. The president of Twist Image, a Montreal digital marketing and communications agency, sees little delineation between work and the rest of his life.

"I'm a digital nomad. I'm always connected and do e-mail at all hours of the night. But I don't send out e-mail with the expectation of immediate return. In fact, unless you're saving babies or finding a cure for cancer, there is no real urgency to respond immediately."

Similarly, Vancouver-based Tom Abbott, founder and president of SoHo Sales Coaching, a coaching firm for small and home-based entrepreneurs, says the evening hours can be the most fruitful for him.

"I'm a night owl and I do my most productive thinking in the night hours. It can be the best time for me to work."

Often, he says, he writes work-related e-mail in front of the television during commercial breaks.

"The sooner I can address things by e-mail and send it back, the better. I'm doing it on my terms. This is very different from having a BlackBerry on my hip that I'm responding to all the time."

## **SEND OR CONSEQUENCES?**

"Is it bad for your career if you don't respond immediately to e-mail at all hours? I think that depends on the people at the receiving end," says Stephen Goldberg, a business coach with Optimus Performance in Montreal. "Some people may expect an immediate response, regardless of what time it is. Others may say: 'Doesn't this person have a life?' "

With everyone else around them responding at all hours, some people may fear that if they don't follow along, they will be seen as less committed than other employees, says Montreal-based productivity coach Ann Searles.

It comes down to corporate culture: If you work in one that demands late-night responses "and you

want to be a player, there's no way to escape it," says Aaron Dresner, a lecturer at Concordia University's John Molson School of Business in Montreal. "You can't be a prima dona by turning it off. There really is nowhere to hide."

However, Ms. Searles questions the zeitgeist in which people are tackling e-mail late into the evening and reflexively answering regardless of the time. "It robs us of the time to think and be creative. When you're answering immediately at 10 p.m. because someone has e-mailed you at that hour, you're not getting any reflection time before responding."

She says that in some corporate cultures, workers who refuse to play the 24/7 e-mail game may jeopardize their career advancement.

But in the larger picture, environments that expect it of staff may be sowing the seeds of recruitment and retention problems, Ms. Searles says.

"If the expectation that you'll always be available is in the corporate culture, then it will affect your career if you don't answer your bozo boss at 10 p.m.," Ms. Searles says. "But when the labour crunch hits, the best people will work in organizations that don't expect that kind of butt-kissing because the best people have choice."

If there's a price to pay for not tackling e-mail in the evenings and on weekends, Nora Spinks isn't seeing it. "I've seen no evidence that anyone's career advancement has been curtailed because he or she refuses to be available to employers 24/7."

In fact, the Toronto-based president of consulting firm Work Life Harmony says she's seeing resistance to the 24-7 expectation. "People are telling me they want to work when it's convenient for them and they don't want to be available 24-7. Just because you e-mail people late at night doesn't mean they want you to reply right away."

Ms. Spinks says she makes a point of asking new clients if they expect an immediate response to e-mail. "I always check my assumptions. Unless someone explicitly states they need responses right away, you don't have to respond right away. Just because we can doesn't mean we should."

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### **Inbox strategy**

Don't want to play the all-hours e-mail game but don't want to jeopardize your career if you don't? Here are some tips from the experts:

#### **Set boundaries**

Add a line to your e-mail signature tag that tells senders the hours during which you respond to e-mail. If you receive a late night e-mail that you don't look at until the next morning, advise the recipient that you 'saw your message last night but in the interest of sending a thoughtful reply, decided to do some research before answering.'

#### **Check your assumptions**

Do people really expect immediate responses at midnight? Ask them before automatically

responding.

Talk to your boss

Tell your superior that you need time to recharge your batteries during your downtime.

Get others on board

Mentor colleagues in your workplace about changing the widespread expectation of immediate e-mail response.

Time to go?

As a last resort, if you can't change the practice, assume that the corporate culture is not right for you and find a new job.

*Stephanie Whittaker*

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