

CRACKBERRY ADDICTS-Technology Addiction: Is It Real? Does It Matter?

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When I present a seminar on technology etiquette to major corporations across the country, there's always one line that grabs people's attention: "And don't ever be accused of practicing the 'crotch watch.'"

"Crotch Watch" is the phrase I concocted for the ever-present habit of people fiddling with their Blackberries under the table at meetings, business lunches, even family dinners (believing their obsession with being constantly in touch is being hidden "under the table.") In psychological jargon, this is called "being in denial."

The term "Crackberry Addict," now a pop culture term, was coined by Paul Levy, President of Boston's Beth Israel Medical Center. He confesses to being a recovering "Crackberry Addict" himself. "I know the result of such over reliance —manners disappear, relationships disappear.....people have a craving to get back to it." (The "it" can be a cell phone or an addiction to checking our text or email messages every 30 seconds.)

Last year Levy quit cold turkey, and he says he has discovered marvelous things: "The sun rises in the morning and sets at night."

Technology addiction comes in many forms: video games, laptops, I pods, cell phones, IM'ing. We've all felt dismissed, frustrated, annoyed and certainly disengaged from the techno addicts surrounding us....or we may look in the mirror and see one blankly staring back at us.

The casualties of the digital age have resulted in the first of "Wii-itis"— intense physical pain from playing the Wii video game system for too long. Physicians are already familiar with "Nintendinitis."

So what are the symptoms that reveal our shift from responsible, appropriate, and essential use of technology into a state of addiction, and is "addiction" too melodramatic a word to use?

Dr. Kim Young, the Clinical Psychologist who wrote the first book on Internet Addiction, believes there are indeed diagnosable signals: an intense preoccupation and inability to control (much less STOP) use of technology; use of technology as an escape, and, finally, putting technology use above personal relationships.

The other side of the debate asserts we are all addicted to the use of technology, in the same way we are addicted to the use of cars. They are an essential means to an end.

Our companies demand—and we as consumers expect—instant communication and accountability. Not a bad thing.

So it comes down to the choices we make in this area—between responsibility and habitual need and between instant gratification and long-term fulfillment.

In fact, Microsoft has teamed up with etiquette experts at The Finishing Academy to produce a guide to the correct situation, form, and manner of communicating with others in our fast-paced and competitive environment.

We are a connected business world, but many principles of common courtesy and relationship building remain the same, no matter the technology—from cell phone to Blackberry to emails.

Here are three suggestions I will make in order to enhance your Technology Presence:

1. Conscientiously—and consciously--work on your technology “presence.” Some people’s emails are immediately dismissed because they know what’s coming: a silly joke, a tirade, an irrelevant copy of another email. Communicate strategically and well, no matter the medium. Leave a voice mail with “presence,” use the cell phone and Blackberry discretely and appropriately: turn away from your “screen addiction,” make eye contact, and communicate person to person.
2. Evaluate how people want to be contacted—such as, evaluating generational differences and communication preferences. Emailing or texting certain people will alienate, not communicate. Pick up the phone and talk! It may take longer, but the long-term benefits of relationship building—and showing respect-- are inestimable.
3. Think as carefully about a high stakes technology communication as you would about a high stakes presentation or letter. Choose your content and format, know the receiver’s formality expectations and preferences, and edit as if your career depended on it. In fact, it may.

Technology is a given. It is an absolute necessity for our fast paced, competitive businesses and lives. But when it becomes a barrier to our inter-relationships, when bad manners become a habit, when we become addicted to instant and constant communication, we have squandered all of technology’s benefits.

Try going Cold Turkey over a weekend. Some companies have recently instituted “No Email Fridays”—forcing their employees to pick up the phone, walk down the hallway, take someone to lunch. If this very concept causes your heart to palpitate and you just broke out in a full-body sweat, it may be time to re-evaluate your addiction to technology.

A recent AP wire story described a phenomenon called “ringxiety” or fauxcellarm” which occurs when Blackberry and cell phone addicts report feeling vibrations when there are none or feeling the sensation of wearing a cell phone when they are not.

“If your hipbone is connected to your Blackberry or your thighbone is connected to your cell phone, the phantom vibrations you are feeling may be coming from your head bone.”

Jake Ward, former press secretary of Sen. Olympia Snowe, “claims to ‘pre-feel’ a new message or call. I’ll feel it, look at it. It’s not vibrating. Then it starts vibrating. I am at one with my Blackberry.”

Some of us are “at one” with our cell phone or our “Ding. You’ve got mail” signal.....perhaps the word “addict” is not too strong?

10 Email/Texting Etiquette Basics

1. Don’t mistakenly press “Reply to all”—This action could be very embarrassing to you and to “all.”
2. Change the subject line as the subject shifts and put a lot of thought into a direct, focused, subject line—like a city editor writing a headline.
3. People read emails with their EARS, as well as their eyes. Beware of sarcasm disguised as wit and read important emails aloud—let your ear catch mistakes your eyes can not.
4. For high-stakes emails, print out the email, and read aloud to catch any tonal “errors.”
5. Get rid of cute fonts and stationery—remember “presence”
6. If there are 3 emails or text messages (email, response, response to the response) pick up the phone or use your feet to walk over to the next cubicle.
7. Use “urgent” with great discretion—have your “urgent” be respected.
8. When sending attachments, give the recipient the highlights of the attachment (s).
9. When texting a high-stakes message, indicate you will send a more comprehensive (less abrupt) message by email within the day or that you will call to discuss in more detail.

10. Acknowledge and accept that you may have grown lazy in your choice of communication techniques and /or you may have become addicted....and that you will make changes.

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