

E-STRESS

The January 2002 issue of *In Sight* included, *Buried Alive*, an article that discussed the impact of technology on the workplace. As noted in that article, e-mail has emerged as the most-used business communication tool in the United States and Canada, with 97 percent of North American corporate workers utilizing it. Information transfers by e-mail now exceed information transfers by the postal service with over 1 billion messages sent daily. This article discusses the contribution e-mail has made to workplace stress and what you can do about it.

In a recent survey of 800 corporate executives in Great Britain done by the Institute of Management, pressure to keep up with e-mails came in tenth in the workplace stress top ten list. It was also cited as significantly contributing to the top two workplace stressors: (1) constant interruptions and (2) deadlines. Researchers at Carleton University and the University of Western Ontario studied 2,437 government employees. Most of the workers surveyed cited the demands of e-mail as the biggest culprit in job stress. The Institute of Management survey proposed that one of the primary reasons e-mail contributed directly to workplace stress was because its near-instantaneous speed drove executives to respond with equal speed.

In their book, *TechnoStress*, psychologists Larry Rosen, Ph.D. and Michelle Weil, Ph.D. suggest that we ask ourselves the following questions:

- How often do you check your e-mail and voicemail during the day?
- Do you have to respond to every voicemail you receive?
- Do you feel compelled to respond to every e-mail you receive?
- Does an e-mail have less or more immediacy than a fax?

- Must you respond to an e-mail or fax right away, or can it be added to your stack of “to do” papers?

Some lawyers believe that to be competitive in today’s legal market they must offer their clients 24/7 responsiveness. They do not feel empowered to establish the parameters or expectations of the attorney-client relationship. Instead, they believe they must provide almost unlimited professional availability to attract and maintain clients. As part of this approach, lawyers find themselves inviting clients to communicate with them by e-mail and by cell phone when they are out of the office. This results in telecommuting from home on nights and weekends at an ever-increasing rate. Although the clients may enjoy the benefits of this 24/7 relationship, it comes at great cost to the lawyer’s ability to sustain a healthy life and career. A healthy and long-term legal career is more like a marathon than a sprint. The 24/7 approach to client relationships works in the short run, but it results in professional burnout in a relatively short amount of time. If your goal is to have a *long* and successful career, you may want to add controlling the use of e-mail and other communication technology to your training bag. Otherwise, they may drag you down and out of the race.

Rosen, Weil, and others studying the relationship between information technology and stress make the following suggestions:

- Advise clients how you prefer to be reached. If a client asks for your e-mail address, but you don’t check your e-mail often or prefer not to communicate with clients by e-mail, tell them it is not the best way to reach you.
- At the beginning of the attorney-client relationship, let the clients know what timeframe you use to respond to urgent and nonurgent requests for service.
- Allow yourself sufficient time to develop a wise

and informed response before responding to client questions and requests.

- Turn off the instant messaging system that alerts you to a new e-mail.
- Give yourself solid, uninterrupted time to work.
- Check your e-mail periodically, not compulsively.
- Don't save huge numbers of e-mails to review or consider responding to at a later time. If it's not worth dealing with now, it may not be necessary later.
- Create boundaries between your personal and professional life. Take time off from work.

If you would like to discuss other stress management techniques with a program attorney, call the OAAP at 503-226-1057.

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TOP TEN WORKPLACE STRESSORS

- Constant interruptions
- Deadlines
- Poor communication
- No support
- Managers with inadequate skills
- Meeting overload
- Office politics
- Modernization
- Getting incorrect information
- E-mails