

Relying too much on e-mail bad for business, study says

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Firing off e-mails and cueing up videoconferences get work done fast, but not necessarily well, research by a University of Illinois business leadership expert found.

Gregory Northcraft says high-tech communication strips away the personal interaction needed to breed trust, a key ingredient in getting workers to pull together and carry their share of the load.

"Technology has made us much more efficient, but much less effective," he said. "Something is being gained, but something is being lost. The something gained is time and the something lost is the quality of relationships. And quality of relationships matters."

Relationships that build trust are critical when workers band together on projects, said Northcraft, a professor of executive leadership who earned a doctorate in [social psychology](#) and studies workplace collaboration, motivation and decision-making.

He says collaborative projects suffer when workers doubt colleagues will do their share, creating a sense of injustice that leads them to shirk their own responsibilities.

"If I'm not confident other people will do their share of the work, I'm less likely to do my share because I don't want to be taken advantage of," Northcraft said. "If everyone takes that attitude, nothing gets done."

The trust needed to build teamwork wanes when projects are managed by way of detached, high-tech means rather than face to face, according to research by Northcraft and George Mason University professor and U. of I. graduate Kevin Rockmann that appeared in [Organizational Behavior](#) and *Human Decision Processes*, a leading journal.

"I think it's not as much about what you see as what you think you see," Northcraft said. "Face to face, people just have more confidence that others will do what they say they'll do. Over e-mail, they trust each other less."

The study put more than 200 undergraduate students through two hypothetical teamwork exercises, some face to face and others through e-mail and videoconferences. Face-to-face contact yielded the most trust and cooperation while e-mail netted the least, with videoconferences somewhere in between, Northcraft said.

He says the study shows businesses need to re-examine their use of high-tech communication, which has grown over the last two decades because of its expediency and because more companies are spread out geographically rather than under the same roof.

"The key is recognizing the limitations and recognizing that exclusive reliance on these lean communications mediums can be potentially dangerous, or at least limiting," Northcraft said. "If you don't, the bottom line is that the job won't get done as well."

He says the findings suggest that businesses should balance use of e-mail with face-to-face meetings to "recharge" relationships and the trust they instill.

"Physical contact has a half life," Northcraft said. "When people meet face to face, they can leverage that over a pretty lean communication

medium for a while and the relationship will not degrade. But after a while, they need to get back together face to face to recharge the [trust](#), the engagement and the loyalty in the relationship."

When distance precludes face-to-face meetings, workers can foster relationships through Skype and videoconferences, telephone calls or even by making e-mails more engaging, such as using graphic icons that add personality, he said.

Northcraft says the findings offer a lesson for personal relationships as well as the workplace.

"My parents live in North Carolina and even though I e-mail them a lot, that's not good enough," he said. "I need to visit and recharge that relationship every once in a while so we still feel connected.

"Whether at home or work, the problem with e-mail and other lean communication mediums is that they're so convenient," Northcraft said. "So the biggest thing people need to do is check themselves every once in awhile to make sure it's achieving what they want."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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