

Emails and texts in lieu of conversation could negatively affect performance on higher-level job tasks

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Is your day a nonstop cycle of email, instant messaging and other text-based communication? New research from FIU Business shows that if

you're looking to stay sharp throughout the day, you might want to take your fingers off the keyboard for a bit.

The research finds that excessive use of text-based [communication](#)—including [email](#) and [instant messaging](#)—for complex tasks, such as negotiating, [decision-making](#) or [problem-solving](#), can lower a person's interest and performance in work started after the conversation is finished.

"Negotiating or working together to solve a problem is more difficult over email or instant messenger than working in person because text-based communication limits visual, vocal and [nonverbal cues](#)," said Ravi Gajendran, the FIU Business associate professor of global leadership and management who conducted the research. "The absence of these cues means that text-based communication takes longer and requires more thought to arrive at a shared understanding. You have to think about what you're writing, to make sure it's not misinterpreted."

In the study, published in the March 2022 issue of *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, researchers conducted tests looking at the relationships between the communication type—electronic versus in-person—on motivation maintenance and performance on complex reasoning tasks, such as negotiating and coordinating.

In another test, pairs of participants had to interact via text or in-person to guide the other on putting a series of pictures in the correct order. After that, they had to read a media story and identify any errors that needed fixing. Those who used text-based communication missed more errors than participants who communicated in person, a 19% reduction in complex reasoning task performance relative to the average in-person communicator.

Another test measured motivation after participants spent 20 minutes on

a task that required pairs to communicate to assemble tangram puzzles and then answer six questions from the Cognitive Reflection Test. Text-based communicators chose the incorrect response more often on the post-study test than face-to-face participants, indicating lower motivation maintenance.

Gajendran explained that the tasks that can be affected by the overuse of email or instant messaging tools aren't routine processes; they require thinking and leading. These can include writing a report, solving a problem, creative thinking and exercising leadership.

"We want to make people better prepared and to keep in mind that using email for these is taxing. Knowing this, you can plan for a break, take a walk before starting a more challenging task," he added. "Top management can know the costs and determine what's better or worse."

More information: Ravi S. Gajendran et al, Hidden costs of text-based electronic communication on complex reasoning tasks: Motivation maintenance and impaired downstream performance, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.obhdp.2022.104130](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2022.104130)

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