

Background

Newcomers to the world of business take all the methods of communication at our disposal for granted. Yet it is only really in the past twenty years that there has been such an increase in the possibilities. You could be in the rainforest of Papua New Guinea, but someone could get you on a sat-phone. You could be lying on a beach in Rio between meetings when you get an urgent message on your Blackberry®. It's virtually impossible to be out of touch, yet anybody over the age of forty can remember what it was like in the 'olden days'. We talked to four people about how changes in communications technology have affected their lives.

Julia Donnelly has been recruiting staff for an educational NGO for thirty years.

When I first started everything was done by mail or phone. Then when the fax machine became available we had to employ someone just to feed forms into the machine. Although we deal with applications online, it has led to an enormous increase in the amount of work. To be honest, it is no more efficient now than thirty years ago.

Drusilla Havel works in an advertising agency with offices in London, New York, and Tokyo.

We have a teleconferencing system where we sit in front of a camera in our respective countries and speak to colleagues in different parts of the world. It can be a real headache setting these up, particularly when you're dealing with so many time zones. I never feel very comfortable interacting with people this way, I feel like a dummy in a shop window. We also use conference calls. You know, you ring a central number, tap in your code, and you're connected to the speaker-phone. Personally, I think that is even less successful as you can't see who's speaking or tell what people are thinking when they are silent.

International business veteran Jens Holby believes there is no substitute for meeting people face to face.

After 9/11 we cut down on air travel by using videoconferencing, but it just didn't work. In the Middle East and South America they insist on knowing who they're dealing with. 'We need hi-touch as well as hi-tech, I like to be able to smell the other guy!' These days there's just such a communications overload. In the old days, when you were away, you were away. Now everybody expects you to take the office with you. Every hotel has its hot spot, so there's no excuse not to check your email. It's especially tough when you find yourself in a different time zone. Nowadays I feel as though I am on call 24/7. The only place I feel kind of 'safe' is on the plane.

Realtor Felicia Gomez, who works in Florida, complains about the mobile phone.

I remember getting my first one over twenty years ago. It was the size of a brick, but I felt like the coolest girl in town. But now I hate the thing, it's like a millstone round my neck. Some clients use the mobile phone as a kind of acid test to see how serious you are. They want a number where they think they can reach you night or day. They wouldn't even think twice about pestering you on a Sunday. The situation has gotten so ridiculous that I have three cell phones. One is for the office, another one is for clients, and the last one is so private that only my mom and kids have the number. Now when clients ask for a mobile number, I hesitate a heartbeat and then wink at them before giving them the number of my client cell phone number, as though it is a big deal! It makes them feel special even if all they get is my voicemail.

Exercises

1 Work with a partner and answer the questions.

As far as you know, how have communications changed in your place of work in
1 the past five years? 2 the past ten years? 3 the past twenty years?

2 What different ways do you use for staying in touch with colleagues, friends, and family?

3 Read the introduction to the article for business travellers. According to the writer how old do you need to be to remember the 'olden days'?

4 Quickly read through the whole text and make a list of the methods of communication that people mention.

5 Read the text again and answer the questions.

- 1 What different developments in communication does Julia mention?
- 2 What impact has this had on the amount of work and the quality of the results?
- 3 Why do you think Drusilla's firm uses videoconferencing? How does she feel about it?
- 4 How comfortable is Drusilla with telephone conference calls?
- 5 Why did Jens's firm try to reduce air travel?
- 6 Why is he such a believer in face-to-face meetings?
- 7 How does he feel about the increase in telecommunications?
- 8 Why do you think he says he only feels safe on the plane?
- 9 How has Felicia's attitude to the mobile phone changed?
- 10 What do some clients expect and how does she satisfy them?

6 Match 1–6 to a–f to create collocations from the text.

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|------------------|--------------|
| 1 urgent | a zone |
| 2 virtually | b call |
| 3 communications | c message |
| 4 conference | d impossible |
| 5 time | e spot |
| 6 hot | f overload |

7 Using the text to help you, decide what the collocations in 6 mean.

8 Complete these definitions of the phrases in *italics*.

- 1 If you *take something for granted*, _____
- 2 If you *don't think twice about* something, _____
- 3 If something is *a big deal*, _____
- 4 If something is *an acid test*, it _____
- 5 If something is *a millstone round your neck*, _____
- 6 If you're *on call 24/7*, _____
- 7 If you are *out of touch*, _____
- 8 If you *cut down on* something, you _____

9 Look back at the text and choose three words that you could use in your day-to-day work.

10 Work in pairs or groups and discuss these questions.

- 1 What does Jens mean when he talks about hi-tech, high-touch?
- 2 If you could 'uninvent' a piece of communications technology, what would you choose?
- 3 Which piece of communications technology couldn't you live without? Why? How would your life change if you had to live without it?