

POSTED ON 18/04/07

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS

When e-mail is not for your eyes

SUSAN PINKER

Dear Susan,

I was recently copied twice on an e-mail about a confidential matter, and I have no idea why. It's about an executive, one rank above me, who is about to leave the company, and what to do about her projects. This information is not public.

Given that the information is sensitive, should I try to find out why the e-mail landed in my inbox, or just ignore it?

-- Got Mail

PRINT EDITION - SECTION FRONT



Dear Mail,

This is like ignoring a piece of space junk that has fallen at your feet. A misdirected e-mail is an artifact, a clue to your business culture.

While it could, indeed, be a mistake, the sender may also have you in mind to help fill in the gaps. So you should follow up, if only to explore whether some of those projects can become yours.

A second reason to pursue the matter is that this stray e-mail is an infringement of the departing executive's privacy, especially if others were also privy to what should have been confidential.

I asked a privacy expert what a company's obligations are in cases such as these. Avner Levin, a professor of law in the business faculty at Ryerson University in Toronto, says organizations must control who gets access to employees' personal information, but few businesses have policies or guidelines that tell them how to do this.

"The reality is that people solve these problems on an ad-hoc basis. No one really has ownership of the issue. It falls between the cracks, between IT, HR and management."

The law on this is spotty: Privacy legislation was enacted by Ottawa in 2000 but its jurisdiction is limited to federally regulated organizations, such as the public service and banks. And just three provinces, Quebec, Alberta and British Columbia, have legislation that addresses employees' privacy issues, Prov. Levin says.

Elsewhere, you probably don't know how your personal information is shared at work. (In the United States, 55 per cent of employers hang on to and review their employees' e-mail messages, according to a 2005 survey conducted by the American Management Association.)

You may think your e-mails are orbiting in the vacuum of outer space. But they may have landed at someone's feet, and you might never know whose.

Dear Susan,

After 18 great months at my current firm, I was promoted to director, and given an additional assignment plus a new boss. Since I started on the new assignment, my career has taken a dive.

The stresses have been many: Besides dealing with new clients, a major internal reorganization left me with a new team. There is a new senior client on the old project, my assistant quit, and my primary project had unforeseen problems. On top of all this, I am planning my summer wedding, expecting my first child and facing a high-risk pregnancy.

I told my boss repeatedly that I am struggling. Her response? "It's easy; you're just not organized enough."

I went to human resources to seek advice. I was told to press my boss again for a solution to my workload. However, I have approached my boss five times in five months.

Finally, after several clients commented that I wasn't myself, my boss asked me why my "attitude" hasn't improved.

Feeling trapped by my company, my stress level and my workload, I took a medical leave. Did I do the right thing? What is the best way to move forward? Recruiters have been phoning, so I know that I am highly employable.

-- Stormy Waters

Dear Stormy,

Just reading your letter made me feel short of breath. Then I inhaled deeply and applied a formula that computers use to solve big problems that have too much information: Divide every piece in two.

If a computer can map the human genome or guide an astronaut to the moon by splitting things in two and voting yes or no, over and over again, this approach can help you attack your problem -- or at least view it with a greater feeling of mastery.

- 1.** Choose between two discrete goals. Now find two smaller goals embedded within the winner, and do it again. And again. You get the idea.
- 2.** Decide what is in your control and what is not. Your new boss seems immutable. That is out of your control. Your old boss or a senior manager may be helpful -- particularly if he or she helped you get promoted.

Your pregnancy is not in your control. Aspects of your mental and physical health can be (although there's no clear evidence that psychological stress harms pregnancies or babies, according to Edmonton obstetrician and gynecologist Mike Bowe).

You've already used common sense in taking a leave when you felt overwhelmed. Reduce guilt and stress further by trusting your instincts.

- 3.** Divide the temporary from the permanent. The job you have now is temporary. Your career and your accomplishments are permanent.

4. Distinguish the past from the future. Your decision to take a leave is in the past. Reap the benefits by not questioning its merits. Where and how you go back to work is in the future. Put your energy there.

This means calling in to the office now and then. It also means talking to recruiters. This will give you a sense of your options, and a feeling of hopefulness (if not a bargaining chip).

5. Delegate what you can. Do only what you must. Vote yes to hiring a wedding planner or a student to assist you. Vote no to being a perfectionist who must evaluate every available option herself.

The Nobel Prize-winning economist Herbert Simon called this strategy "satisficing," or opting for the best you can do under the circumstances considering your goals (see item 1). Take this route instead of "maximizing," which means aiming for the absolute best no matter what it costs in time, money or anguish.

Of course, human problems are organic, not mechanical. People have unpredictable, subjective experiences called feelings, memories and relationships. Computers are binary systems that operate with specific inputs and outputs, so the comparison is not perfect. But this is the best I can do for you right now.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist who writes about human behaviour and social science.

Are you having interpersonal problems at work? Send your queries (100 words maximum, no attachments please) to: spinker@globeandmail.com

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