

# E-mail's limits create confusion, hurt feelings

By Janet Kornblum  
USA TODAY

E-mail can kill a friendship. Just ask Jay Weil, a San Francisco day trader who was becoming fast friends with a woman he met on a message board for people who work from home. Weil is convinced they'd still be friends today if they had talked instead of typed.

But things fell apart when Weil, 34, made what he thought was just an off-the-cuff comment in an e-mail. She was checking in to see if he'd accomplished some goals he had set for himself. He had told her that instead of wasting time in the afternoon, he resolved to practice his bass guitar. But when she inquired, he shot back a sarcastic comment: "I don't need another mother."

It "was totally meant as an innocent joke," he says. "She more or less blew up." He knew she had misunderstood, but by the time she finished her missive to him, the relationship was beyond repair. They never talked again.

Unfortunately, Weil's experience is not an isolated incident. And the scenario is likely to be played out more than ever as more of us come to depend on electronic messages in our daily lives.

As of December, 55% of adult Americans were e-mail users, according to the Pew Internet & American Life project; up from 35% in December 1998.

And with the problems that have plagued postal mail since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, many Net users have grown increasingly reliant on the speed and convenience of e-mail for a wider range of both business and personal communications. "A lot of people use e-mail more se-

riously than they did before," says Pew project director Lee Rainie.

But while e-mail may be just fine for some communications, it can't be a substitute for face-to-face conversation — or even a phone call. It's when people try to push e-mail beyond its limitations that relationships suffer, experts say.

"We're expecting far too much communication from e-mail," says Quentin Schultz, a professor of communication arts and sciences at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich. "There's a tremendous over-reliance on e-mail, which is leading to a lot of confusion, misunderstanding, anger and frustration."

Gina Pell knows exactly what he means. Pell, of San Francisco, had sent an e-mail to her sister asking her to set up a dinner with her sister's boyfriend. What Pell didn't say in the e-mail — because she was in a hurry — was that she wanted to introduce him to some friends who might help his career.

"Somehow my request opened the floodgates for her pent-up resentment about how I treat her like a secretary and how it was inappropriate for me to hang out with her boyfriend," Pell says. "Rather than try to clarify the situation, I responded with a scathing, critical e-mail in typical haughty older-sister fashion."

The heated exchange got more and more intense, and finally boiled over. They didn't speak for a year.

Both sisters are sure it never would have happened if they had just picked up the phone. Today, they make a point of calling each other when potentially sensitive questions arise in e-mail.

"I would have been able to gauge her reaction from the sound of her voice or from her demeanor," Pell says. "And she could

ing e-mail," he adds. "Our point is while there's a conflict involved, that's a real good time to get off of e-mail."

But what, then, is the difference between e-mail and conversation? Here what the analysis suggests:

► **Low feedback.** Conversation is give-and-take exchange, but e-mail allows one to "talk" at length without any response. If you happen to have misunderstood someone's words, you might not be corrected until it's too late.

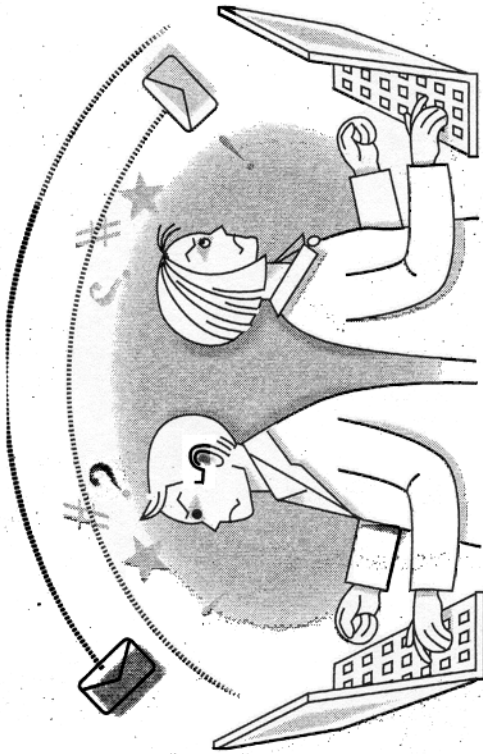
► **Reduced social cues.** When we talk we can hear the tone of a joke that might come across as stern on paper. Emotions those little expressive smiley faces create with commas, colons and other punctuation symbols, can hint that something meant lightly, but can't replace voice or visual cues. Also, some people might not recognize what the symbols mean.

► **Excess attention.** On one hand, it's ability to revise and edit e-mail can be beneficial because it makes us more careful. On the other, it can make us too careful. "Full attention may be helpful, but excess attention is not," Friedman says.

► **Lengthy e-mails.** E-mail allows it writer to go on forever. That can overwhelm the recipient. It also allows it sender to selectively respond to some points, and ignore others. "In face-to-face contact, the other person isn't going to you rail on for 10 or 20 minutes before it's spilling," Friedman says.

The bottom line? Be aware of what you can and can't do. "When people interact over the computer, all the behavioral norms tend to go away," Friedman says.

► [mha.vanderbilt.edu/fray/friedman](mailto:mha.vanderbilt.edu/fray/friedman)  
E-mail [jkornblum@usatoday.com](mailto:jkornblum@usatoday.com)



By Quin Tian, USA TODAY

have sensed my intentions from the way I asked. Also, ugly words have a way of evaporating, unlike e-mail, where they fester until deleted."

Very true, says Raymond Friedman, associate professor at the Owen Graduate School of Management at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. He recently did an analysis of e-mail's limitations, which is posted on the school's Web site.

Friedman, who specializes in conflict and negotiations, decided to take a closer look at e-mail after experiencing the hazards of high-tech communications firsthand. He'd been communicating with an editor by e-mail when the relationship started souring; it turned out each was taking the other's comments as far more

"Our point isn't that we shouldn't be us-

