

# Detroit Free Press



Remembering some historic moments. PAGE 11A

WWW.FREEP.COM



35 cents  
60 cents outside 6-county metropolitan area

## MIKE WENDLAND

### *Masses of sloppy e-mail are holding workers back*

Do you wonder why you can't seem to get ahead at work? Why your professional career seems stalled? Are you increasingly withdrawn, tongue-tied and frustrated on the job?

Blame it on too much e-mail.

So says corporate writing consultant Dianna Booher, who contends we're being buried in a deluge of poorly written and inappropriate e-mail that is stealing away huge chunks of our workday.

"People think e-mail leads to better communication," says the Dallas-based Booher. "We've found just the opposite. E-mail is

undermining productivity and stopping a lot of people from advancing."

How so? First, the sheer volume of e-mail is interfering with work. Booher surveyed 900 people at 35 corporations and found that 67 percent said they spend two hours or more, every day, reading and answering e-mail.

But there's another big problem her research uncovered. "People are avoiding personal conversations. They don't talk anymore. They e-mail. And e-mail is never as clear and understandable as a real conversation."

Booher has put together a book called "E-Writing: 21st-Century Tools for Effective Communication" that draws on much of the research and skills shared at her seminars ([www.boohier.com](http://www.boohier.com)). She says too many business e-mails are carelessly written.

"They write off the top of their heads and don't spell properly or use poor grammar or, worse yet, are too blunt or snide or angry.

And their bosses get those e-mails and may judge the employee to be rude or bitter or sloppy."



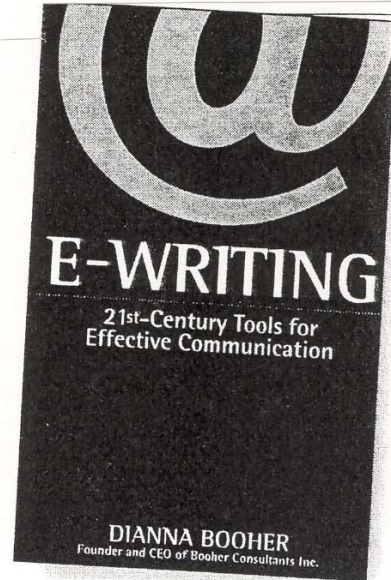
Dianna Booher

Then there's the legal issue. In court cases, it's now routine to subpoena all of the corporate e-mail. "It used to be, corporate writing was done only by the middle or top managers, people with at least some understanding on how to phrase things. But now, with e-mail, the \$6-an-hour employee's angry e-mail to a friend about a work situation can easily end up in a court case."

Bosses, too, are far from immune to the temptation to hit send without thinking.

In March, Neal Patterson, the CEO of Kansas City-based Cerner Corp., which makes health care software, hastily pounded out an angry e-mail to 400 of his top

managers.



E-mail has slowed production and hurt our communication skills, Booher found. So she wrote a book.

managers.

Patterson was frustrated at employees and the hours they work. He lowered the boom in the e-mail, frequently using all capital letters to indicate wrath, saying that "hell will freeze over" before he offered any more employee benefits unless he saw the parking lot "substantially full" at 7:30 a.m. and 6:30 p.m. on weekdays and "half full" on Saturdays.

The e-mail, intended to be private, was soon spread around the world on the Net by insulted employees. It was blamed for a huge sell-off of Cerner stock, which plummeted about 22 percent, to \$34 from almost \$44, in two days. It has since climbed back to over \$40 but the lesson was not lost.

Says Booher: "E-mail is never private, travels fast and lives on forever."



Contact MIKE WENDLAND at [mwendland@freepress.com](mailto:mwendland@freepress.com) or 313-222-8861. To read his regularly updated e-journal, click on the link from the TechToday page at [www.freep.com](http://www.freep.com).