

By [BILL HENDRICK](#)

It's a *feeling*. You *just know* she's there. Looking down at her ringing phone that's flashing your 10-digit number. Drinking coffee. Gabbing with pals about movies or fashion or just perusing a magazine. Or maybe she's just not in a mood to talk.

At least, not to you.

So you're rolled over to her voice mail, and leave a message, realizing that in today's hectic high-tech world, odds are good you won't even get a call-back,

at least not soon. You feel dissed, ducked, disappointed, frustrated — even a little paralyzed — realizing that maybe she'll try to reach out and touch you a minute after you head to the break room.

She'll then leave you a voice mail, which you'll return only to leave another voice message in teeth-grinding annoyance because, by then, she'll have stepped out to Starbucks or be yawning in a two-hour meeting.

Society may be plugged in as never before — with personal digital assistants, cellphones, text-messaging, faxes, caller ID and voice mail — but experts say Americans are increasingly feeling unplugged, disconnected and out of control, trapped in a never-ending game of phone tag.

According to a recent survey of 1,750 people by Siemens Communications, 67 percent of Americans think they spend too much time leaving voice mail and sending e-mail when quick answers are what they need. And when answers finally do arrive, these same people reported the calls often came back too late.

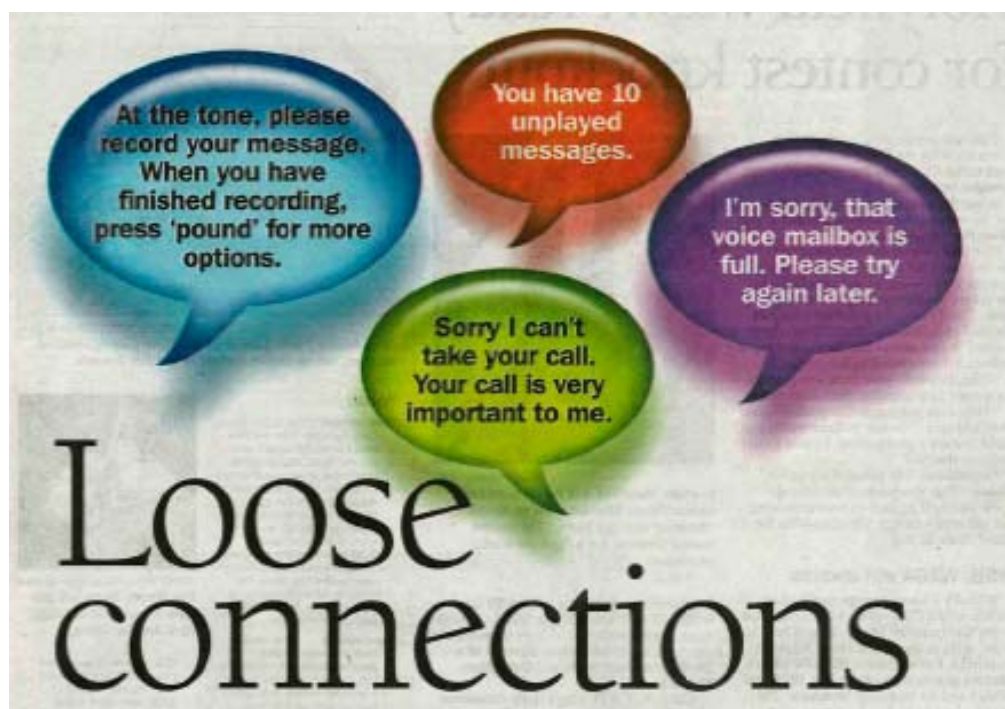
Productivity is declining because it's so hard to reach people, said Barry Lawrence of Siemens. And our personal lives have grown more frustrating because it's hard to get to a live person at your health club or day care center. Technology designed to make our lives easier is affecting our work, lifestyles and mental health, Lawrence said.

And it's also making our skins thinner, said Wu Zhou, a senior analyst for Boston-based IDC, a top telecommunications research firm, because we never know when or if the person we're trying to reach listens to voice mail or reads e-mail.

Technology may have become a boon for some, but it's made it easier to be rude, indifferent, even lazy. People are screening calls, ignoring e-mail and failing to return voice mail as never before, Zhou said. But those who do listen to voice mail and read e-mail spend a lot of time on such chores that could be used more productively.

About 38 percent of Americans have caller ID at home, and most at work, she said. Often, big companies have so many employees that many have found it impossible to reach a co-worker — even one you can see across the room — without getting up from your desk to grab them, Lawrence said.

Screening calls "is the whole purpose of caller ID," Zhou said. "The irony of having better telecommunications is that people have more of a need to wall themselves off to access. But there's a downside. People can be almost impossible to reach."



In short, high tech is making it easier to be rude, said professor Pier Forni, an expert on manners at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and author of "Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct" (St. Martin's Press, \$20). He said the rising number of unreturned voice and e-mail is just another sign that incivility is on the rise. A Yale University study found that 78 percent of executives polled felt incivility had worsened in the past decade.

"We are so bombarded by information that we are defending ourselves with tools such as caller ID," he said. "If a talkative friend is calling and you are busy, you have the good, traditional option of answering. Just state that you are busy and that you will call back later."

But not responding to voice or e-mail "is a form of non-acknowledgement, hence it's rude," Forni said.

And he feels that baby boomers, who came of age in an era without computers and e-mail and when everyone answered their phones, may be more perturbed at this new kind of gridlock than younger folks.

Motorola executive Sid Hasan, 49, of Atlanta, feels caller ID is a godsend, and uses it to screen his calls, but it torques his jaw when his voice mail or e-mail isn't returned promptly. Or ever.

"You never know if the person you left the message for listens," he said. "And the negative side is, you have to keep calling back. Now you just assume that if you call, you won't get a human to answer."

Steve Trimarco, a 58-year-old manufacturers rep from Woodstock, said he seldom answers calls from friends during business hours and sometimes forgets to return voice mail.

"It makes me long for the days when returning a call was good manners," he said. "Now, you know people are ducking you, and hitting the 'delete' button. I find myself calling business contacts three or four times a day. You know people don't have their noses to the grindstone every minute of the day."

So if a voice-mail machine gives him the option, he always punches the button that promises to hook him up with a real secretary or office assistant.

Lynne Childers, who answers the main phone at the real estate offices of Pardue & Co. in Dunwoody, asks if the caller would like to be sent to the voice mail of someone who's busy. Many prefer talking to her.

"There are some people who don't want voice mail," she said. "They don't trust it, they don't want to go through the hassle and they don't like technology. They'll ask me to take down their names and numbers and hand the slip to the person they missed."

Others have little, if any, problem with new technology.

Liz Raphael Helgesen, 41, of east Cobb County, who makes her living by recording messages for corporate America's voice-mail systems, screens calls with caller ID and says she returns all voice mail.

"When I'm on the other line, in a conference, in a recording session, parenting or eating a meal, it would be inappropriate to interrupt an existing conversation, meeting or family time to take a phone call," she said.

To Helgesen, caller ID is an important tool. To others, it's "the ruination for many companies," said Steve Ramey, 55, of Lilburn.



"I make 80 to 100 calls a day, and I probably get five or six voice mails returned," he said.

And no solution is in sight.

Almost all big companies with hundreds of white-collar workers cooped up in cubicles

provide caller ID and voice mail. It's estimated that 53 percent of people screen calls at home, but that percentage is much higher at work.

"People rely on caller ID because they don't want to talk to you," said Jeff Kagan, a national telecommunications analyst in Atlanta. Management consultant April Callis of Lansing, Mich., added that people use voice mail "to collect calls they don't want to deal with and don't plan on returning."

Robert Thompson, professor of popular culture at Syracuse University, said the combination of caller ID and voice mail has gummed up all sorts of human interactions and raised stress levels everywhere.

"It's just like during the Pony Express days, when you never knew if you didn't hear from someone because they didn't write or the pony died," he said. "Now, if you don't hear back, you get bent out of shape that people are blowing you off. There are a lot more hard feelings."

