Executive EDGE

MAKING HIGH-TECH TALK MORE HUMAN

Although e-mail and voice mail are making business communication more efficient, they are doing so at a psychic cost.

Scientists have long known that isolation—an inability to make face-to-face contact with other people—is injurious to human health. Anecdotal evidence suggests that workers who primarily communicate with each other via electronics are increasingly at risk for emotional illnesses ranging from mild anxiety to paranoia.

If nothing else, electronic media can easily distort the messages people try to send each other. "I've found you can stumble into giant misunderstandings with e-mail," says a manager at an investment company. "People's feelings can get hurt and wrong information can get picked up." Neither hurt feelings nor emotional illness is good for business.

These problems arise because electronic communications occur outside what might be called "the human moment"—a genuine encounter in which two people occupy the same space at the same time and use body language, facial expressions, and a wide range of vocal tones to help convey meaning. In the absence of such moments, people often come to feel emotionally deprived.

Some companies are now combining "high tech with high touch" in attempts to ameliorate such deprivation:

• Electronic wizardry enabled one firm to base its entire sales force in the field—which made the salespeople more mobile but hurt the company's culture. To correct this, the CEO requires all employees to come into the office at least once a month for "face time."

• A Boston real-estate developer who found that he was losing touch with his associates established a ritual he calls the "Thursday pizza," a day when everyone is invited to gather in the office to eat pizza, brainstorm, and renew old ties.

• A consultant for independent furniture stores discovered that because furniture salespeople were increasingly making their rounds electronically, retailers, who had depended on the salespeople for industry news, were feeling isolated. The consultant regularly brings together groups of retailers from different parts of the nation to talk business and trade advice.
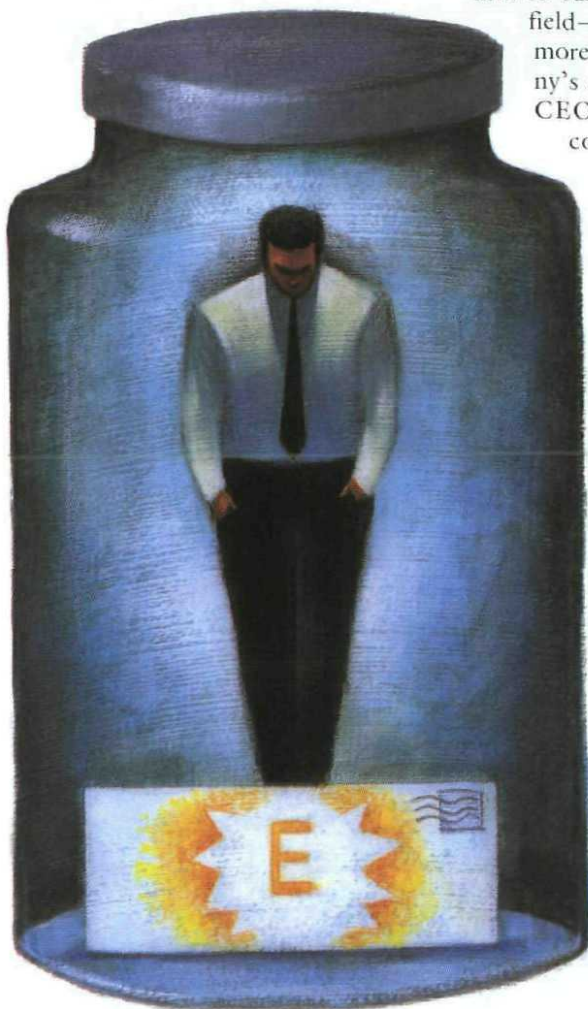

Illustration by Chris McAllister

From Edward M. Hallowell, "The Human Moment at Work," Harvard Business Review, *January-February 1999, pp. 58-66.*

READY, SET . . . BRAINSTORM!

Can you teach people to be creative? Some would say yes—or, at least, you can teach people techniques that help them home in on productive, workable ideas. That's the premise behind Ideo U., a seminar program conducted by Ideo, a successful Silicon Valley design firm. Clients, impressed by Ideo's consistently impressive and practical designs, asked how they did it, and Ideo obliged with creativity training.

The first step in developing creative solutions to problems is brainstorming, following the Ideo rules:

• Defer judgment, to avoid interrupting the flow of ideas.

• Build on the ideas of others.

• Stay focused on the topic.

• Allow only one person at a time to speak.

• Make quantity your goal. Ideo staffers shoot for 150 ideas in 30 to 45 minutes.

• Encourage wild ideas.

• Be visual—sketch ideas out to help people understand them.

When developing a product, rapid prototyping follows brainstorming. Prototyping Ideo-style consists of three Rs: Rough, Rapid, and Right. Make rough models rapidly; don't waste time making perfect models at this stage. To make models right, build many small models that focus on a small section of what you're making. The parts can be put together later.

The key is to act, to come up with even half-baked ideas rather than get stuck in deliberation and contemplation. If you and your team can brainstorm 100 ideas in an hour, at least one will be a diamond in the rough you can polish to perfection.

From Ed Brown, "A Day at Innovation U.," Fortune, April 12, 1999, pp. 163-165.