Working across a digital divide: When you’re connected, but your colleague isn’t
By Dan Weissmann
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They're out there. Despite the steady stream of exhortations to keep upping the ante on the always-connected life—if you're not Tweeting 24/7, you'll be left in the dust; get that LinkedIn profile polished or you'll never work again—there are holdouts.

People who take things slower. Late adopters. Digital dinosaurs. No Facebook. Maybe no cell phone. For some, e-mail isn't really an everyday—or at least not every-minute—fact of life.

Yet, somehow, they still have jobs.

So what happens when you have to work with someone who is several steps behind you on the digital path?

For Laura Donahue, that someone is her boss. As human resources manager for a non-profit based in the suburbs, Ms. Donahue, 43, is a recent convert to social media as a business tool. Her organization, not so much.

There's no official policy against using social media, but her supervisor has made his position clear. “My boss is like, ‘I'm not going on Facebook. You get viruses when you go on Facebook. And I don't know what that LinkedIn thing is, but I don't have time to play around on the Internet,’ “ she says.

But Ms. Donahue, impressed by what she saw at a conference earlier this year, has integrated Web 2.0 into her work life. “If I'm given a project at work where I need to do research, I go to Google. And to Twitter and Facebook and LinkedIn, to see what's out there,” she says. Already, she's been impressed by the information and advice she's found with a well-placed Tweet or a post to a LinkedIn group.

But she does it from home, or from her smartphone. “I'm just not sure how well-received it would be to do it on company equipment,” she says.

When presenting the results of her research, she keeps the attribution purposefully vague. “I say, ‘I collaborated with some colleagues,’ “ she says. “I'm very much in the closet at work.”
When the time comes, she knows what she'll tell her colleagues: “I'd say, ‘It's just another resource I have available. It's not my only source. Yes, it's really easy online for everybody to be 6-foot-2 or the HR professional of the universe, so you have to take things with a grain of salt or do other research behind it.’”

Holdouts like Ms. Donahue's boss may simply be trying to manage an important resource—their attention, says Daniel Mittleman, associate professor of computer science at DePaul University, whose research focuses on the role of technology in collaboration. Mr. Mittleman himself recently ditched his cell phone in order to better manage when and how people could reach him.

But complete avoidance of the connected world means sacrificing its benefits, too. “I'm sure they're doing what they've always done—and they're as effective as they've always been,” Mr. Mittleman says. “They haven't lost anything by not using the new tools. The problem is, their competition is probably using the new tools and becoming more effective than they are.”

NO PDFs, PLEASE

Sometimes the dinosaur is a colleague who's nonetheless worth the trouble. Alexei Marcoux, 45, an associate professor of business ethics at Loyola University Chicago's Graduate School of Business, knew what he was getting into when colleague Al Gini invited him to collaborate on a book. “His Luddite tendencies are well-known,” Mr. Marcoux says.

Indeed. Mr. Gini, 66, professor of business ethics and chair of Mr. Marcoux's department, doesn't own a cell phone. He doesn't check e-mail on weekends. He does much of his writing in longhand.

“My reputation with my children is that I am just caught in the 19th century,” Mr. Gini says. “And I always say, ‘No, that's too recent.' I'm not a brain surgeon. I'm an ethics teacher. Nothing much has happened in my field since Socrates.”

Nonetheless, Mr. Gini points out, he manages to maintain his roles as a teacher, administrator, consultant, radio personality (he is a regular contributor to morning show “848” on WBEZ-FM/91.5), editor of an academic journal and author.

 Asked how he responded to a recent series in the New York Times about brain research on the downsides of being constantly “plugged in,” Mr. Gini says, “I was right! But I knew I was right. It's kind of like a story saying, ‘Oh, Hitler was a really bad guy.' Of course, having said that, I worry every day that I'm just a grumpy old man.”

Mr. Marcoux, meanwhile, stays connected via smartphone to e-mail, social networks, text messages and phone calls. “I try to ‘unplug' for a couple hours here or there, but it almost feels uncomfortable,” he says.

Knowing what to expect with Mr. Gini, Mr. Marcoux prepared himself to make adjustments to his partner's ways—for instance, by bringing hard copies of documents to their meetings. “I would never assume that he had read a PDF,” Mr. Marcoux says.

And he expected Mr. Gini to take extra steps—or have others take them on his behalf—to accommodate his need to organize information digitally. “He'll make an important note on a sheet of paper and hand it to me,” Mr. Marcoux says, “and I'll say, ‘No. Give it to your secretary. Have her type it up and convert it to a PDF and send it to me by e-mail. That way I'll know how to find it.’”
The arrangement worked well enough that the pair have since collaborated on two more books.

“We were truly a technological odd couple,” Mr. Marcoux says.

A FAX MACHINE?

Sometimes a meeting across the digital divide can actually enhance a relationship. That was the case when Kristina McGrath, 40, and Marci Holzer, 53, members of the Joffrey Ballet's Women's Board, teamed up to co-chair this fall's Couture and Cocktails gala. The two didn't know each other before they took the assignment in March. Now, with the Sept. 24 event fast approaching, they finish each other's sentences.

It didn't start out that way. “Immediately, I realized we were going to have to communicate on a daily basis,” Ms. McGrath says. “I said, ‘Can I get your e-mail address?’ And Marci asked me, ‘Do you have a fax machine?’”

“I don't do Facebook,” Ms. Holzer says. “I do face time.”

So they compromised. Ms. Holzer, who generally keeps e-mail at arm's length, set her computer to sound an alarm whenever correspondence about the Joffrey event came in. And Ms. McGrath made time for more face-to-face meetings.

“I have to say, it's been very refreshing,” Ms. McGrath says. “You get so caught up in e-mail, you lose . . .”

“Passion,” says Ms. Holzer, stepping in. “You can't do passion in an e-mail.”

Ms. McGrath says she has found herself incorporating some of Ms. Holzer's style into her working life at McGrath Lexus/Acura, where she is director of customer relations. While she often communicates with her staff through e-mail, she recently called six of them in for a real-time meeting, to walk through the dealership.

“I wanted to draw their attention to what the customer sees visually,” Ms. McGrath says. Together, they decided to spruce up the lounge with new pillows and fresh flowers.

Meanwhile, she and Ms. Holzer have each played to their own strengths in their work on the Joffrey event. Ms. McGrath offered some special tickets to the gala through Facebook. Ms. Holzer sent out handwritten notes, each one personalized to the recipient.

“We found that there's a happy medium,” Ms. McGrath says.

“We're finding that you need both,” Ms. Holzer adds.

Not all collaborations turn out so well, of course. Absent agreement to use different approaches, a holdout simply becomes a weak link, DePaul's Mr. Mittleman says. “If you have a team member who refuses to work to the norm of the team, then the team is going to be less effective.”

Luke Krzysztofiak, 28, a real estate agent at Re/Max Signature in Chicago, almost ran out of patience with a mortgage broker who worked with his clients on a deal this year. Mr. Krzysztofiak was accustomed to closing deals in days, but this one dragged on for months, because, he says, the broker took forever to respond to e-mails.
In real estate today, Mr. Krzysztofiak says, that cuts against the norm. “Another broker, if I call on Sunday morning to ask for a pre-approval, he's going to have it for me that morning. With her, I have to wait until she gets back to the office—on Monday.”

He found that hammering the broker repeatedly with text messages was the only way to get a simple question answered. “I think she doesn't realize how much benefit a smartphone would be,” Mr. Krzysztofiak says.

At the closing—which took place at the end of August, more than four months after the contract had been signed—he overheard the broker take a call, and Tweeted his impression: Overheard “I'm not in my office yet so I can't check my e-mail” #businessfail.

Of course, the mortgage broker probably didn't see it.