

# Dealing with an e-snub

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## What should you do when someone suddenly stops responding to your emails?

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Hot on the heels of "phubbing", when people play with their smartphones and ignore those around them, there's a new passive-aggressive cyber phenomenon called "e-snubbing".

E-snubbing occurs when one party unilaterally and without explanation decides to pull the plug on a business relationship that is conducted mainly or exclusively online. It seems to have reached epidemic proportions, raising the question of how to avoid experiencing it in the first place and how to best respond when it does happen.

The crucial thing to understand about e-snubbing is that it's a way of signalling who holds the whip hand in a relationship; people almost always e-snub down not up the status hierarchy. Following Enron's spectacular collapse, Columbia University academics gained access a dataset of more than 600,000 emails sent by 158 of the corporation's employees.

To summarise the results of their study, *Automated Social Hierarchy Detection through Email Network Analysis*, the more important you are, the quicker your emails get answered.

So if someone isn't responding to your emails at all, it's painfully apparent how little importance they place on you.

Danial Ahchow, founder of Service Central, an online market for tradies, advises structuring emails like a business proposal if you find yourself in the supplicant role and want to minimise the chances of receiving the cyber silent treatment.

"It's probably true I experience email snubbing a lot less now that Service Central is a big company than I did when it was an unknown start-up but I suspect that's got as much to do with me learning to take a more professional approach to emailing people as it does with the position I'm now in," says Ahchow.

"I recently emailed the CEO of a big listed company to request a meeting. He didn't have to respond and it's still the case that sometimes people like him don't. But he did reply, presumably because I clearly laid out who I was, the reason I wanted to speak with him and why it would be a good investment of his time to meet with me. I get a couple of hundred of emails a day and while I aim to respond politely, I don't feel any guilt about ignoring an email that reads: 'Hey, let's catch up for coffee, I'll tell you what it's about when we meet.' I'm amazed at the number of people who send those kind of emails then wonder why they don't get anywhere."

Julie Lamberg-Burnet, director of the Sydney School of Protocol, suggests the best way around an e-snub is to take things offline.

"Email stress is a huge issue so people shouldn't leap to the conclusion they're being deliberately ignored if their emails aren't replied to," says Lamberg-Burnet. "If that's happening, I'd advise communicating with the other party through another channel: either the phone or face to face. As frustrating as not getting a response is a lot of people, particularly digital native Gen Ys, will hide behind technology and fail to resolve the situation by interacting directly with the other party. By having that conversation, things will either get back on track or it will become clear the relationship is definitely over and it's time to move on."

The entrepreneur and the etiquette expert have different ideas on what degree of persistence is acceptable in the face of ongoing e-snubbing.

"If it is clear that the other person no longer wishes to continue the relationship, accept that graciously and thank them for any opportunities they have provided," advises Lamberg-Burnet. "You should protect your personal brand by remaining professional at all times."



Danial Ahchow: structure emails like a business proposal.



Julie Lamberg-Burnet advises being professional at all times.

Showing the never say die perseverance that made him a multi-millionaire by his mid-twenties, Ahchow argues there are situations where it is worthwhile simply ignoring an e-snub.

"I once spent four years trying to land a deal with an industry association and for the first two of those years they didn't respond to my emails," Ahchow says. "But, very slowly, I was able to win them over and eventually do the deal.

"Another example of where tenacity paid off was when I emailed a radio station a couple of times to offer them a million-dollar advertising contract. For reasons never explained they didn't respond to my emails but years later I decided to try placing some ads with them again. That time I did get a response and ended up meeting and marrying someone who worked at the station."

If you're an inveterate e-snubber, it's worth considering the distress your (non) actions are causing people who may one day end up in a position to return the favour. Conversely, if you're receiving more than your fair share of e-snubs you need to review the way you use email to communicate and screw up the courage to have a real-time chat with that client, boss or supplier who's been ignoring your email entreaties.

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