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High-level faux pas

Spot-welded as she is to her BlackBerry, you'd think it would take an act of Congress to make Sheila Ronis ignore it for half an hour. It turns out you had to go a little higher up the flow chart.

Ronis concedes that the BlackBerry can be the gateway to obsession, sin, perdition and rudeness. As much as she tries to fight the demon, she has in fact been that person hiding a BlackBerry beneath a conference table at a meeting, answering an e-mail and fooling no one as she pretends to remain engaged in some drone's presentation.

"It is in many ways incredibly rude," says Ronis, 58, the director of the MBA program at Walsh College. As a scientist who earned her Ph.D. studying large, formal social systems, she will also tell you we're at the point, business-wise, where BlackBerry blight can be almost an obligation.

If the boss knows you carry a BlackBerry, for instance, it's hard to not let your thumbs jump to attention when a Lord High Query flashes across your screen. But did mourners really, truly need to use their BlackBerries this month at Bill Davidson's funeral?

No wonder the devotees call them CrackBerries. Ronis, our de facto BlackBerry etiquette expert, says the only time she turns hers off is when a flight attendant gives the command.
Otherwise, it might be set to “Quiet,” but she's still stealing glances. It's a way to keep in contact with her 55-hour-a-week job when she's in Washington, D.C., where she travels regularly to consult with the military.

Not quite three weeks ago, Ronis and 400 other people were in an auditorium there for the dedication of Abraham Lincoln Hall at National Defense University, which you don't get to attend unless people have already been saluting you for quite a while. She was in the second row, the first having been saved for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, when onto the stage walked their boss.

Yes, the president of the United States. Reflexively, she checked her purse -- and her BlackBerry was not only glowing, the ringer was set to its usual Bach Fugue in D Minor.

She very quickly muzzled it, and "I didn't even think about the BlackBerry until after it was all over and he had left the room," she says. So take heart, addicts. The president himself might need to intervene, but you can in fact ignore the darned thing.

Use common sense

A BlackBerry is not in the budget for Chris Scharrer, the executive director of Leadership Oakland, but the device is no stranger to her seminars.

Users are mostly courteous, she says, and she understands the incessant flickering of eyes to screens. Ideally, "I don't want anyone who needs anything from me to have to wait an hour, or even five minutes."

At 56, she remembers the ancient days when missives came only by mail, and everyone was eager to see what the letter carrier brought. Then came answering machines, followed by portable phones the size of a loaf of Wonder Bread, followed by e-mail and text messaging and now the BlackBerry to combine it all in one handy intrusive package.

"We've always had that curiosity and that desire to see who's trying to contact us," Scharrer says. Now some of us have the desire to be left alone, but sorry, sport. The train has left the virtual station.

Ronis suggests that in the absence of formalized rules for BlackBerrys, users should apply common sense and common courtesy. Funerals, no. Small meetings, no, unless you notify everyone in advance that you might need to excuse yourself to deal with a spectacularly urgent
problem. Unexpected spectacularly urgent problems, yes, as long as you slavishly apologize all the way to the door and then return with snacks.

For conference calls, Ronis says her iron-clad rule is to take note of who's trying to reach her, but take no action. The exception came March 4, when her son and daughter-in-law were engaged in something spectacularly urgent in Ohio.

When that call came, she bailed out of a group chat about the National Security Act. By the time she tuned back in, the voice from Washington was asking if there were any comments.

"Yes," said Ronis, more glad than ever to have a BlackBerry in her arsenal. "This is Sheila. It's a girl."

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