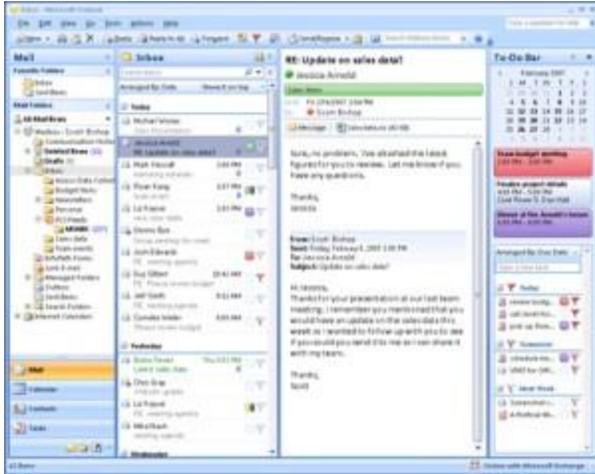


## Are Our Expectations About E-mail Unrealistic?

October 19, 2010-- Posted by Stephen Seckler, President, Seckler Legal Coaching



Once upon a time, if you wanted to communicate with someone in writing, you sent a letter. For the most part, once the letter was placed in a mailbox, it was a pretty safe bet that the letter reached it's destination.

Today, the U.S. mail still has a role to play in business and in our personal lives, but most of us now rely heavily on e-mail to send a specific message to a specific person, particularly in business (texting seems to be taking up more of the slack on the personal side as of late).

Unfortunately, the reliability of e-mail is far from 100%. As on-line marketers have tried to exploit the medium, we have all set up various filters to block the spam. As anyone who has used e-mail knows, until you get some sort of confirmation, you never really know if your message was read. The explosion of spam as well as legitimate uses of e-mail has meant that many messages are buried far back in our in-boxes never to be seen again (even if they make it past the filters).

Despite this, many of us still have expectations that e-mail was in fact received and read. In some instances, this is causing miscommunication between sender and intended recipient. I know for myself that in the past several weeks I got annoyed at three different people for not responding to my repeated inquiries only to later learn that the individual never saw the messages.

Earlier this week, I spoke to a former colleague who was bemoaning the fact that a potential employer seemed initially interested in helping him but has not responded to his two e-mail messages...and it's been at least two weeks!

I pointed out to him that until you call to confirm, you do not know for sure that your intended recipient ever saw the message.

Of course there is always the risk that the receiver did get your messages and was trying to ignore you. So it is important to follow up with tact when checking to see if a message was received. ("I wasn't sure if you saw my e-mail message so I'm calling to follow up.")

Communication is changing quickly in the workplace and in many ways, the problems with e-mail are going to get worse. Texting, for example, is the preferred mode of communication by Gen Y while an older generation (including me), prefers the nuance and immediacy that comes with a two way phone call.

But I'm obviously fighting the tide. Today [on WBUR radio](#) (On Point) there was an interesting discussion of how texting is replacing phone calls, particularly amongst individuals under 30. The new paradigm for 20 somethings is that phone calls are intrusive and that voicemail is an annoyance because it takes longer to access than a text message.

Wow! Next thing you know, we'll all be communicating through some chip that has been implanted in our brains.

Personally, I think that we could all benefit from additional critical thinking about how to appropriately use the myriad of tools we now have available for communication. I [wrote about this](#) 5 years ago before texting took off. But until then, I guess we all need to cover our bases and find ways to interact that feel appropriate and effective to all involved. It's a Tower of Babel problem that can only be solved by speaking many languages.