

You're not using the phone enough and it's a problem

[Sociology](#), [Communication](#)



Hey, wanna feel old? Great. Let me get a startup exec. on the phone. [*Ring, ring*] Hi there. I'm trying to reach Elena Gorman, product marketing lead at, the group-chat and file-sharing company. [Waiting] Elena, hello! Question for you: What do you think of when I say the word *telephone* ?

“ Working in Silicon Valley, I haven't had a desk with a phone on it since 2010.”

You don't say?

“ I can imagine a scenario where getting someone on the phone would be the quickest way to resolve a complex issue. But even with that, we have video chat and group video chat in HipChat. The only reason to ever bring up my phone is if wi-fi is spotty. I think most young people probably associate telephone communications at work with or more high-pressure situations. In Silicon Valley, we all work at computers, right? And most of our jobs are based around using the internet in some way. To use a phone takes me physically out of my workflow. Just the manual process of dialing with my fingers, looking up a number...”

Excellent. I'd like to spend the rest of this column unpacking pretty much everything she just said. Thanks, Elena. Elena?

(I think she hung up.)

Elena Gorman has hit on the ironic value of telephoniccommunication. It is fear-inducing (especially to a generation of texters) because it involves stakes. Getting on the phone with someone means a decision needs to be

made. You don't go to all the trouble to press seven to 10 buttons, then listen to two or three buzzes, then (possibly) speak to someone you can't see and not be here to get something done.

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But this is why it works. This is why it matters. This is why I'm here to endorse the telephone as the most valuable form of business.

First, it's important to acknowledge the various ways in which the phone is god-awful. To begin with, it's not a sure thing. (Will the other person even pick up?) It can be really inefficient. (Phone tag.) It's strangely anxiety-producing. (*Ring. [pulse rate creeps up] Ring. [pulse rate creeps up]*) There's the annoyance of cellphone lag. (*There's the annoyance of...Oh, sorry, you go ahead.*) And there's the thing where the other person is eating what has to be a salad with lots of blue cheese dressing and it just sounds gross.

" My students under no circumstances want to make a phone call to set an appointment," says Keri K. Stephens, associate professor of communication at the University of Texas, who is writing a book on communication in business. " I have an assignment in a class where they have to do that, and they will make up every in the book -- ' Oh, I sent them an email! Oh, I sent them a text!' I tell them, ' No, you have to talk in real time to another human being.' And they don't want to do it."

But why? Stephens blames the: “ Some people really don’t want to bother other people. But part of the reason is they don’t want to be told ‘ No.’”

And yet this is why the telephone is the best. It’s better than texting. It’s better than email. It’s better than video conferencing (which, OK, is like the phone, except with the added unnecessary worry about what you look like). It’s the best form of communication in business precisely because of it kind of blows. The telephone perfectly illustrates a key truth: If you go to a lot of trouble to get yourself in a situation that feels a little uncomfortable and half-baked and no one likes all that much, then you have no choice but to get yourself out of that situation. You’re invested. You’ve made an effort. You’ve prepared. You’ve steeled yourself for the problems that come with talking on the phone. You’re ready to deal with an awkward silence. You’re ready to be on.

The telephone builds. And when the going gets tough, grit comes in handy.

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The next time you’re about to email or text someone, ask yourself this: Am I avoiding the phone because I don’t want to be told “ No”? Am I avoiding the phone because I don’t want to feel rejection? Is this about trepidation?

And while we’re at it, here are some more questions to consider: Am I avoiding the phone because I don’t want to make the other person uncomfortable? Am I unsure of my own level of commitment to what I want to propose to the other party? Is it advantageous to have no written record

of what we're about to discuss? Am I in my 20s and unclear about the nature of this strange piece of equipment on my desk that has numbers and lights on it and what looks to be a " cord" of some sort?

If you answered yes to any of those questions, then call. The telephone allows you to efficiently converse, unlike email or text. It allows you to roll your eyes, unlike video conferencing.

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Most importantly, it forces you to be slightly more committed to your cause. To be slightly more hopeful. Go ahead; pick up the phone. Say, " Hi there! I'm invested in this!"

Right?

Hello?

I think you have the wrong number.

Ugh.