

**INTRODUCTORY NOTE:** Ellen Goodman has written for the Boston Globe since 1971; her essays on contemporary issues, which won her the Pulitzer Prize for commentary in 1981, are also carried by newspapers throughout the United States. The following passage is adapted from an essay Goodman published in 1990.

### **THE CORDLESS TIE THAT BINDS PEOPLE TO WORK**

I am standing in the lobby of a large office building when the man beside me starts talking into his briefcase. The fellow looks buttoned up and rational, so I assume if he is hearing voices, they are real ones. There is a phone in his briefcase.

I am sitting at a red light in traffic, when the car beside me starts ringing. The driver picks up the receiver and begins a now common routine. She steers her car with one hand and her business with the other.

I am somewhere over Connecticut on a one-hour shuttle from Boston to New York when my companion sticks his credit card into the chair before us and calls his office to find out if there are any messages. At 22,000 feet he leaves a phone message in Boston about where to forward his phone messages in New York.

Once upon a time, a sitcom hero named Maxwell Smart used to talk into his shoe, and we laughed. But somewhere along the line, the high-tech gadgetry of the spy films got transformed into the tools of everyday trade. Today there are people within reach of a phone every moment of their lives except takeoff, landing and a long tunnel ride. The work-world is now an interlocking network of communications and messages, a proliferation of phones, a great babbling overkill of Touch-Tone technology. We live from call-waiting to call-forwarding, from answering machines to voice mail.

In theory, this population explosion of phones and faxes and pagers has sprung into being to offer mobility and freedom from the office. Indeed people who take phones to the gym, the restaurant, even the bathroom, swear by the freedom they gain with this telephone tether. But watching my colleagues-on-call, I have become convinced that this network is a tie that binds more and more people to work. The executives who go to the beach with a towel and a telephone aren't liberated from the office: They are only on work-release. The cellular commuters haven't changed the work environment; they have turned every environment into workspace. Those people who take their phones to the gym remind me of parolees let out of jail after being collared by a tracking device.

We've gone too far. In the work-world, we are increasingly seduced by the notion of how efficient it is to be in constant contact with each other. The phone in all its forms has become a kind of endless meeting that entices us to spend more time communicating than producing. And the operative phrase is "more time." The Bureau of Labor says that Americans are working longer hours than they used to. Twenty million or so of us have bumped the workweek over the forty-nine-hour mark. There are no figures that tell us how many of those hours are spent leaving messages for people who

left messages to call. Nor do we know how much time is spent responding to questions that were asked only because of the availability of the instant-information-gratification system. In the constant-contact future, it's easy to see an insidious expansion of work and a more insidious extension of the workplace. In the industrial age, the factory foreman controlled his workers from nine to five. In the information age, workers are always available. Today it is possible to begin work with the first commuting mile on a cellular phone, continue it through a lunch accompanied by a "personal communications network," and end with a bedtime chat into your briefcase. In twenty-four-hour contact, we haven't missed a thing except, of course, the time for rumination, the solitude and space for the work we call thinking.

For years the pitch of the company was "Reach out and touch someone." Now we're all tied up, workers of the world united by the Touch-Tone, and we need a new slogan. How about this one: "Let my people off the hook."

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### **ESSAY TOPIC**

For what reasons does Goodman object to what she calls "the cordless tie?" What do you think of her views?

To develop your essay, be sure to discuss specific examples drawn from your own experience, your observation of others, or any of your reading--including "The Cordless Tie" itself.