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## Out of Office Reply

I'm probably the only person in the world who enjoys reading OORs, out of office replies—those computer generated messages that tell an email sender that the recipient is not in the office.

Once a month, I send out a newsletter to a list of friends, consulting and coaching colleagues, people I've met at networking events, family, past and current clients, parents from my kids' school. People on the list may be someone I met last week or someone I know from twenty years ago. They can be someone who seems like a hot prospect for my consulting and coaching practice or someone who wouldn't hire me if their world was falling apart and I was the last person on earth who could help them (which describes some members of my family to a "T").

This monthly mass mailing of sorts (no, please don't describe me as a spammer—I take great pride in emailing those people who actually know who I am and who would provide me shelter in the event of a tornado), inevitably results in a number of OORs. Summer is vacation time in the U.S. Some OORs are what I would expect—"I'm on vacation and won't be back until Thursday, when I'll respond to email." Others are meant to make others not only aware that they are on vacation, but also envious—"I'm in Maui for two weeks on the beach and then to Bali for a meditation retreat for another week. Sorry I won't have access to email until I get back!" And still others are complete surprises—"I'm on maternity leave for the next six months. Contact Michael if you need some assistance before I return." No wonder I had not heard from her in awhile. Virtual relationships have a downside—you don't know when someone is undergoing major hormonal and life changes until the deed is done.

I noticed the tone of OORs. Some are meant to relay a sense of what's really important. "I'm out of the office due to a family emergency." In other words, get a life. I'm not available. Deal with it.

Other OORs are apologetic and begging for understanding at the same time. "I am out of the office Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday because I am moving. I will try to work some on Thursday and will make an attempt to read email the other days." Translation: For the next few days, I'll be sorting through boxes to find the cordless phone and the coffeemaker, eating on the floor in front of cable-less TV with crummy reception, and sleeping on a bed with no sheets and pillows that smell of the last meal I ate at my old house. It's only the Gremlin part of me that feels some compunction to even attend to

work. What I really want to do is go back to bed and hide under the covers until the mess goes away.

Some OORs are half commitments, where the person can't decide if they are or are not available. "I am taking the week of July 15 as vacation. I will be periodically checking my emails and will attempt to respond to urgent requests. If you have an urgent issue, please call me on my cell phone and leave a voice mail message. I will attempt to respond ASAP." This person's idea of vacation is that the Blackberry gets turned off between the hours of midnight and 5am.

Others are decidedly abrupt in order to nip in the bud any idea of being contacted. "I am on holiday through the end of the month. I will not have access to voicemail or email." Okay, I get the idea.

OORs also show the hierarchy of "go-to" people, who to contact when the recipient of your email is not available. "In my absence, Ed Smith will be assuming all of my responsibilities." In other words, Ed is King of the World while I'm gone. I even ran across two OORs for two different people, pointing to the same person. What was that thing about six degrees of separation?

So what to make of all of this? I'm grateful for OORs. It brings me into the lives of people, even if only remotely. I know to ask Joe about his great vacation to Hawaii next time I talk to him, to ask Mary about balancing her family responsibilities with her work, to appreciate how Sally can draw boundaries to recharge herself, to catch up on Steve's move as an empty nester. I know that Mark trusts and relies on Ed, even though Ed is three time zones away.

There's a great sense of being connected to others that email provides, even when there's no one to talk to. And I'm aware of how even the smallest things say something about the people behind them. People who have touched my life either a week ago or 10 years ago are suddenly on the radar screen again. At a time when we are stretched thin to "keep up" with others, OORs give us a glimpse of what others are up to and who they are. Sustaining a deep connection with even a fraction of the people I've come across in my lifetime is a major effort. So I'll settle for an interesting out of office reply every so often.

Out of office replies are the artifacts in our own personal time capsule that outline major life events, give us a hint of what we value, indicate how well we balance work and personal time, and identify who we trust. So the next time you set up an OOR on your computer, think about what message you want to send out to the rest of the world. I'm not going on vacation for another month but I've already figured out what my OOR will say: "I'm out of the office for the next 5 days, enjoying the sweetness of time with family, exploring new places, and learning to let go of work in order to fill up my tank again. If you need assistance while I'm gone, trust yourself to know the right thing to do."

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her magic by bringing the power of the creative, intuitive right brain into a left-brained world. While her degrees in engineering from Northwestern University have served her well, it's been her life and work experiences that have moved her to do her best work. She is certified by The Coaches Training Institute and credentialed by the International Coach Federation.