



by Jack Hadley

Farewelled by my unit and signed out on PCS leave, I stood at a German train station headed to the airport. Then my phone went *ding!* I reflexively glanced at it, feeling a small but noticeable tinge of stress. I was no longer a Company Executive Officer (XO), but my pavlovian response to text messages had been trained into me for months. The XO group chat. I opened the message. Just a request for help from an adjacent XO—no crisis. Still, the message sucked me back into the distraction-filled task execution I had eagerly awaited leaving behind. So right there, at the train station, I decided it was finally time to exit all seven XO-related group chats. A cathartic wave of relief washed over me. I finally felt free.

Why was my group text exodus so liberating? Because these group texts were the symbol and source of my greatest professional frustration while serving in a Brigade Combat Team (BCT): our sloppy over-reliance on texting. The effects of our poor text communication habits include spotty and ever-changing 'guidance', inefficient task coordination, normalized distraction, and, as a result, dissatisfied soldiers. These negative effects' accrual will affect our combat readiness—if we don't change our current texting norms.

Two Misuses of Texting: 'Guidance' and 'Coordination'

Texting is arguably Americans' favorite form of communication. Only counting SMS messages (i.e. excluding texts via Facebook, WhatsApp, and other messaging services), Americans aged 25-34 send and receive over 80 texts a day. For 18-24 year-old Americans, that number exceeds 100. It seems likely to me that most small-unit leaders in BCTs greatly exceed these national averages simply for daily work purposes. Not including group chats, as a company XO I received and sent texts to an average of 25 different colleagues, multiple times a day. With a conservative estimate that I sent and received over 200 work texts every day, and that each took 30 seconds to either draft or read and process, that amounts to 100 minutes of work-related texting every day. I, too, am guilty of perpetuating our over-texting culture.

There are two primary texting misuses in the Army. The first is a stream of texted guidance, requests, and questions from higher. This steady text flow, seemingly innocuous, has normalized perpetual whiplash below the battalion level. As a result, small-unit leaders' garrison work rhythms tragically follow a daily, enervating cycle:

We start the day with an ambitious but manageable set of priorities. Next—*ding!*—the natural friction of the day's work is compounded by intermittent, piecemeal text distractions ("Did you talk to the mechanics yet?"). By late morning—*ding!*—or early afternoon—*ding,*

ding!—the flurry of texted tasks, requests, and entire “textfragos” from higher collectively unseats the day’s original priorities. Like elephants asked—*ding!*—to turn on a dime, whole platoons and companies painfully pivot to achieve half-baked results for newly texted ‘priorities’ (“Everyone needs to go to the clinic to get their Flu shots this afternoon”). Finally, leaders and soldiers—*ding, ding!*—go home wondering what they accomplished that day. Often those demoralized soldiers’ phones *ding!* again at 1900 with tomorrow’s priorities. The plan will have changed again by 0930 the next day—*ding!*

The second common misuse is texting to coordinate action. Yes, texting *can* enable wider task accomplishment, but in practice it often delays results. For example, I frequently witnessed platoon leaders and squad leaders texting peers or subordinates in adjacent offices, less than 30 meters away. No immediate response would trigger the transition to the ‘Alternate’ in the PACE plan: face-to-face conversation. Where they probably should have started.

One morning I asked an NCO (in-person) to obtain a kicker box arranged for pick-up from an adjacent company. I emphasized that this was a relatively high-priority task, important for rapid deployment readiness. At 1800 that evening, I noticed that it hadn’t arrived. When I followed up with him the next morning, my NCO explained matter-of-factly, “I texted the point-of-contact you gave me. He never responded.” Somewhat surprised, I clarified, “Are you saying that your text is the only thing you tried?” He replied, “Well, sir, I mean, I’ll try again today in-person, if you want me to” (and this was not an incompetent NCO!).

Sadly, texting is so endemic in the Army that we now trick ourselves into thinking that because we have sent a text, we have attempted to solve a problem. Instead, texting often delays solutions. This sounds painfully obvious, but we must coach today’s small-unit leaders into making face-to-face conversations and phone calls the Primary and Alternate in our garrison PACE plans, prior to texting.

Longer-term Effects of Texting

The effects of our rampant texting are difficult to study because smartphones are a relatively new technology, and it’s difficult to isolate the effects of over-texting from our generally unbridled phone use. But I can share my personal experiences, observations, and assessments of our over-texting blindspot.

First, as a greater share of our communication happens over text, our ability to communicate verbally seems to atrophy. I personally have detected a noticeable decline in my ability to retain auditory information, perhaps because I expect most information to be

later disseminated (redundantly) by text. As a small-unit leader giving guidance, I sometimes found it hard to hold my soldiers accountable for tasks I communicated verbally but which they failed to accomplish. Occasionally, where no texted record existed, I struggled to remember when or how I had given the guidance. This decrease in verbal communication skill creates inefficiency in task accomplishment and may be dangerous in a combat environment where texting is not an option.

Second, an organizational culture that expects (consciously or not) that company-grade officers and NCOs will respond to text messages within minutes develops soldiers trained to be distracted. Yes, we can keep a dozen plates spinning in the air thanks to the speed and ease of texting, but we sacrifice the concentration required for hard, long, cognitive work. This develops leaders with degraded skill sets in concentration, attention management, and decision-making who naturally drift towards accomplishing simple tasks rather than tackling difficult and important priorities.

Relatedly, the science of concentration proves that degraded attention management skills makes us not only less effective, but also less happy. One [Stanford psychology study](#) on amygdala responses to visual stimuli demonstrated that people with lower attention management skills lack emotional control and suffer from a [decreased sense](#) of overall well-being. Elsewhere, science writer [Winifred Gallagher](#) summarized the importance of these findings:

Diverse disciplines from anthropology to education, behavioral economics to family counseling, similarly suggest that the skillful management of attention is the *sine qua non* [the essential condition] of the good life, and the key to improving virtually every aspect of your experience.

Army texting norms are complicit in growing a generation of Army soldiers and leaders more accustomed to distraction than to efficient, prioritized, and meaningful work. These soldiers sense that they are not living their best lives or achieving their potential. Moreover, these distracted soldiers later become the leaders who interrupt their subordinates' efforts at meaningful work, perpetuating the cycle of ineffectiveness and dissatisfaction.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our over-reliance on texting will have tactical costs on the battlefield in our next war. For today's Brigade Combat Teams, cell phone usage during field training is a given. This is not inherently a problem, but it becomes one when we bring to the field our same poor texting habits from garrison. During down-time between high-intensity training, we interrupt ourselves and reactively text down information just like in the office. Battalion and brigade staff texting each other in the field to coordinate

logistics is not training how we fight. Among other things, this sacrifices training opportunities on JBCPs, radios, communications windows, and tactical PACE plans. Even worse is texting during training itself. For example, I've observed soldiers Snapchatting each other and texting memes in the middle of short-duration field problems. From my conversations with officers in other battalions and brigades, this appears to be the norm. Do we imagine that these distractions will have no effect on combat readiness?

Conclusion

To be clear, text messages—including group messages—can have immense utility. Harnessing the power of texting properly, Army leaders can text to widen their span of control, keep records, and get more things done well—all while sharing laugh-out-loud memes with colleagues. The key is understanding how to text in the right way and in the right setting.

The most effective use of texting I've witnessed was my platoon sergeant's informal afternoon text roll-ups to our squad and team leaders. His purpose was to remind our subordinate leaders of the next day's key pre-scheduled events. The texts were not a substitute for in-person meetings, and he never allowed a culture of over-reliance on them. For us as leaders, drafting this text message forced us to consolidate our notes, decide on priorities, and deliver them efficiently. Importantly, he sent the text during the duty day, usually around 1600—never at 2100.

My platoon sergeant's effective texting, however, is a rare exception. Few Army leaders understand the timing and content of effective texting. I'd therefore like to close with a few recommendations for promoting texting self-awareness and reducing the damage of our current poor texting habits.

Small-unit leaders would be wise to watch and reflect on their own texting habits for one week, asking questions like, Who do I receive the most texts from? Who do I send the most to? How far is their office from mine? In which cases would face-to-face be more efficient? They should also note specifically the times where they reactively disseminate received guidance. Even where platoon sergeants or company commanders receive texted guidance, there are often ways to stop the sloppy cycle of disruption. For example, waiting till the subordinate is back in the office after lunch, or waiting till close-out formation to disseminate. Or—if urgent—opting for a phone call. In every case, recognizing our habits is the first step to making a plan of action for improvement. Texting improvement plans may include changing notification settings, refining battle rhythms within the span of one's control, or even updating counseling statements to include text reduction measures that

subordinates can rely on.

Battalion commanders and executive officers should consider prohibiting texted guidance for same-day action. If this is impossible, then limit the same-day action requests to two windows a day: for example, one from 0800-0930 to push out updates, and one window from 1230-1330 to dictate close-out criteria. Texts carrying guidance at 1030, 1600, or 2000 are almost entirely avoidable and battalion level leadership should demand this of themselves and their subordinates. Where unbriefed and urgent contingencies arise, phone calls or office visits suffice. Units that confine texts to these communications windows—or nix texts entirely—will see fewer distractions during the duty day, improved verbal clarity and task accomplishment, higher combat readiness, and happier soldiers.

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