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Bereft of BlackBerrys, the Untethered Make Do

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Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

Douglas Philips scanned his BlackBerry for e-mail messages in San Francisco Wednesday. More than five million users of the wireless devices were affected by an unexplained nationwide loss of service for 10 hours.

By BRAD STONE
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Where were you when the BlackBerrys went out?



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times
Ilana Raz checked her BlackBerry outside Grand Central Terminal.

On Tuesday night at 8 p.m. Eastern time, technical problems cut off more than five million BlackBerry users in the United States from their cherished wireless e-mail. Service was restored 10 long, data-starved hours later.

The BlackBerry blackout was grueling to many — and revealed just how professionally and emotionally dependent so many people had become on their pocket-size electronic lifelines.

Stuart Gold was in Phoenix on a business trip when the service went down. Mr. Gold, the marketing director for Omniture, a software firm, noticed ominous red X's next to his outgoing e-mails.

He is not proud of what happened next.

"I started freaking out," he said. "I started taking it apart. Turning it off. Turning it on. I took the battery out and cleaned it on my shirt. I was running around my hotel like a freak. It's very sad. I love this thing."

At 6 a.m. Wednesday morning, full of anxiety about the prospect of spending a traveling day untethered, Mr. Gold awoke and made a beeline for his still motionless phone. At 7 a.m., it started vibrating with activity. "I breathed a sigh of relief," he said. "Life was

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good.”

Many people thought they were suffering alone.

Lynn Moffat believed she had administered a fatal blow to her BlackBerry by dropping it early Tuesday in Grand Central Terminal. When Ms. Moffat, the managing director of the [New York Theater Workshop](#), learned on the radio that the service disruption was widespread, “I was so relieved it wasn’t just me, but all my BlackBerry brothers and sisters,” she said.

Others cycled through complex waves of emotion, including a bit of paranoia. Zach Nelson, chief executive of NetSuite, a software firm, was entertaining his top sales representatives in Barbados when e-mail from his 600 other employees suddenly stopped arriving on his BlackBerry. “I started thinking people hadn’t shown up for work as a revolt for us going to the Caribbean,” he said.

[Research in Motion](#), the Canadian company that makes the BlackBerry devices, shed little light yesterday on what went wrong, releasing a statement that said the “root cause is currently under review.”

Part of the problem, though, could be the service’s rapid growth: R.I.M. says it has added three million subscribers in the last 12 months, for a total of eight million, in part because of the popularity of its superslim BlackBerry Pearl.

BlackBerry users have had scares before. Last June, technical problems twice interrupted service, though both failures lasted only a few hours and were confined to specific wireless carriers that sell the devices.

A patent dispute also threatened to shut the BlackBerry service altogether more than a year ago. Though R.I.M. denied any patent violations, it avoided a crisis by settling for \$612.5 million. At the time, the BlackBerry faithful could only speculate what deprivation might feel like.

Now they know. Symptoms include feelings of isolation, a strong temptation to lash out at company I.T. workers, and severe longing, not unlike drug withdrawal.

Elaine Del Rossi, chief sales officer for HTH Worldwide, an insurance company, reacted to the severed electronic leash with several panicked calls to her office in the belief that the company e-mail system was down.

“I quit smoking 28 years ago,” she said, “and that was easier than being without my BlackBerry.”

Even at the White House, officials complained that the blackout had badly disrupted their morning routines, and a spokesman, Tony Fratto, pleaded with reporters to be patient with him.

“We’ve already started a 12-step program,” he said, then joked that the White House counsel, Fred Fielding, had ordered the stoppage— a reference to the dispute over missing e-mail messages concerning the controversial firing of several [United States attorneys](#).

Rob Whitehouse, vice president for communication of University Hospitals in Cleveland, was brought face to face with his powerful addiction at 11 p.m. on Tuesday night, when he realized he was “jonesing” for a message on his inexplicably silent device.

“I have reached the point where I get phantom vibrations, even when I’m not carrying the thing,” he said. “That sure doesn’t sound too healthy, does it?”

But some BlackBerry users looked at this week’s episode differently, treating the silence

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as a reprieve. Barry Frey, a senior vice president at [Cablevision](#), stepped off an airplane on Tuesday night to find that his in-flight e-mail exile had been extended.

His reaction was BlackBerry blasphemy. “I took a deep breath and finally enjoyed the feeling,” he said.

The less frenetic world he describes may not only be saner, but safer. Peter Crist, an executive recruiter in Chicago, admits to occasionally steering his car with his knees while he thumbs his BlackBerry. Tuesday night, he put both hands on the wheel and said he had a quiet, uninterrupted dinner with his wife and son — for a change.

Other BlackBerry users were also forced to reconsider some bad habits. At the annual meeting of the National Venture Capital Association in Washington, venture capitalists said that the interruption meant one less distraction, allowing them to pay closer attention to the presentations.

In offices, employees had to speak with colleagues over the phone and in actual face-to-face conversations.

The BlackBerry blackout, just like the power failures of yore, could have even helped in the romance department — if couples could actually connect. Robert Friedman, president of the media and entertainment division of [@radical.media](#), a production company, said the disruption gave him “a lot of free time on my hands to spend with my wife, although I couldn’t find her since her BlackBerry was off.”

When service was restored yesterday morning, most BlackBerry users were happy to dive back in and start sending e-mail. R.I.M. was under pressure to make sure the failure would not happen again. BlackBerry e-mail is more costly than alternative services offered by [Motorola](#) and [Microsoft](#), but in the past R.I.M. had justified the premium by claiming it had a more reliable service with a higher level of security.

Stuart Gold, the software executive, speculated that the blackout would create opportunities for other wireless e-mail companies, a view shared by others.

If one of R.I.M.’s rivals were able to guarantee its service, he said, he would want his company to explore switching.

Others took the inconvenience more in stride, including David Plouffe, the campaign manager for Senator [Barack Obama](#).

Mr. Plouffe said his eerily empty in-box brought back a time in politics when there were no such things as mobile phones, thumb-typing and a never-ending flood of e-mail.

Yet, “everything seemed to work O.K.,” he said. “Quite frankly people have to talk more in that situation. That’s probably a good thing.”

Ian Austen, Matt Richtel, Louise Story, Joan Raymond, Jeff Bailey, Adam Nagourney and Jim Rutenberg contributed reporting.

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