

Welcome To the Slack-upation

by Alexandra Lander, 2005

Message Boards. Without them, Randomville would not exist. In this day and age they have become a subculture in which people across the globe unite, discuss, and oftentimes escape from their mundane workplaces.

I never used to have time for online socialization in the past decade, as my evenings were spent either studying for a class, working on a household project, grading papers (in my teaching days) or going out with local friends. When I first went to work in my former editing job, I spent lots of time in front of the computer. The last thing I wanted to do when I got home was go online *again*. Therefore, I never envisioned a future with many cyber-friends. Last year, all that changed with just one click of the mouse.

In the spring of 2004 I went to a “Boards Bash” and met several people from the message boards of a local indie radio station. Many were professionals with busy lives, homes, families and obligations. I asked some of them, “How do you find the time to talk on the boards when you get home?” I could almost hear the party come to a screeching halt. First they looked at me like I was nuts. Then they answered in unison, “We do it at *work!*”

I was shocked. Playing on the computer at work? Didn’t their supervisors see them? Weren’t they afraid of getting fired? I told myself there was no way in hell I could even *attempt* to get on the boards at work, especially with my very open, shallow cubicle being right in the path of the coffee machines. Little did I know that in exactly four months, I’d be hopelessly attached to a “cyber family” of my own, and have them coming into town from all corners of the country.

Prior to the Boards Bash, I had been listening to an online radio station based in Paradise, California. Its musical genres were widespread and eclectic. For the longest time, all I did was listen at work and make occasional posts in the song comments. Eventually, I wandered onto the boards to read reviews of concerts or answer a poll. One day I was in the “Films” forum asking a question about an Audrey Tatou flick and got directed into a recurring miscellaneous forum (let’s call it the Other Galaxy, for the sake of anonymity) where people talked an awful damn lot, judging from the number of posts (it was well over three thousand at the time and always in the Top 4 forums). I felt like the cowboy who walks into a bar and suddenly the piano stops playing and everyone stares. Instead of a cold reception, however, I immediately felt a sense of warmth and camaraderie as people began to welcome me and ask who I was. There was something about these people, with their amusing avatars and taglines and hilarious ranting that made me want to check back in the next day. I posted more replies and joined in more conversations. After revealing parts of myself in the Journal section and exchanging private messages with people who had many things in common with me, I was hooked. The Other Galaxy

was like a cyber “Cheers” where everyone did indeed know your name—both screen and real-life.

So back to the problem of doing this whole cyber-visiting thing at work. That’s where it became an art form. Many people in the forum offered their suggestions: leave a spreadsheet or word processing window open, so that you can “hide” the forum window behind real work whenever questionable people came into your office or cubicle. Get proficient at *extreme* minimizing. Face the computer away from your door and nosy cubicle-peepers. And what about wasting your company’s time? Again, the art form comes into play. The art of slacking—without disrupting workflow. Once you become accomplished at posting, it only takes a few seconds out of the minute you spend doing your work to type in a reply or post a new idea. Adding emoticon smileys takes a little longer, but you eventually get proficient at them as well. You can answer the phone, do Internet research or finish that spreadsheet while alternately discussing ferret-raising, hot-linking images in response to funny topics, or sending a “good vibe” emoticon to an ailing member who is home sick. If things do get too busy to post, you can always come back later and back scroll to see what you’ve missed.

I have learned message board vernacular, since becoming a regular, such as *lurking*, or quietly watching the posts without making comments. In the Other Galaxy, there is a popular lurker whose radar goes off whenever someone posts an image of themselves—because even though he doesn’t appear to be on the boards, one’s photo inevitably gets captured and comes back (after being worked over in Photoshop) in an often unflattering but hilarious way.

What I like best about message boards is that I suddenly have friends from all over the country—or world, for that matter. People on the Florida coast share stories and images about the hurricane ripping through their town. Artists and writers share websites that showcase their amazing talents. People that have meetups post journal entries and photos from it, so that those who can’t attend feel like they are there. One member even turns on her webcam as she makes batches of salsa in her kitchen. It was this incredible bond I felt with my fellow music lovers that inspired me to hold a gathering of my own—on the eastern side of the country. I posted an idea about it, and the next thing I know, people are planning their trips and booking flights. Like my own personal Field of Dreams.

After the message board epiphany, I looked back on my former judgment of participating on work time, and suddenly it didn’t feel so wrong anymore. My work got done, I was able to function in two worlds at once, and I forged many friendships as a result. Only in the Age of Information could all this be possible. So post away, I say. Slacking is in the eye of the beholder.

My deepest apologies to REM for the play on their words in the title of this article.