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Don't Let Technology Get in the Way of People

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We live in a world designed for convenience. We text instead of calling. We email instead of walking down the hall. We send a message instead of having a conversation. And increasingly, we turn to artificial intelligence (AI) to help us communicate, make decisions, and get more done.

From the COVID-19 pandemic, when we were forced to eliminate much of our in-person contact and quickly adapt to virtual communication, to a generation that has grown up with smartphones, social media, and digital platforms as an integral part of everyday life, face-to-face interaction has become less central to how we communicate. For many, it is even starting to feel like unfamiliar territory.

Now, as AI becomes a fixture in the workplace, technology is once again changing how we communicate, collaborate, and get work done. With that evolution comes a growing concern that technology will not only change how we work but ultimately replace the human beings doing the work.

There is no question that AI will transform the workplace. Some jobs will change, some will disappear, and entirely new roles will emerge. But there is one thing technology cannot replace: the value of human connection. In fact, the more digital our workplaces become, the more important face-to-face communication has become.

Think about the difference between completing your to-do list and building a relationship. Is your goal simply to check off as many tasks as possible, or is your goal to build relationships that create trust, understanding, and lasting value?

A digital message can deliver information quickly, but it can also be misinterpreted in tone and meaning. In addition, a digital message can't capture the hesitation in someone's voice, the expression on their face, the energy in a room, or the signals that tell you something is left unsaid. Those nonverbal cues are an essential part of how people understand one another.

The Value of Being Present

When I ask people about the best part of their day, their answers almost always involve face-to-face connection: a conversation with a colleague, a client meeting, lunch with a friend, or an unexpected

interaction.

Face-to-face communication is as important with people we work with every day as it is with our clients.

We can sit in the same organization and communicate almost exclusively through email, instant messages, and virtual meetings. But co-workers are not simply names on a screen or people listed on an organizational chart. They are people with ideas, experiences, challenges, and perspectives that we understand much better when we take the time to interact with them.

Time Is Money. What Is Your Time Worth?

To be fair, there is a very real argument for efficiency because time is money.

That is particularly true in professional services. For example, lawyers bill by the hour, accountants track their time, consultants charge for their expertise, and doctors have packed schedules and a long list of patients to see. Therefore, it can be tempting to choose the quickest form of communication, such as sending an email or text.

But is the time you saved worth it if you lose the relationship in the process?

Consider a lawyer who bills $1,000 an hour. It may seem more efficient to answer a client's question by email rather than spend 30 minutes sitting down with that client to fully understand the situation. But what if that conversation uncovers a larger business concern or if the client has been considering moving their legal work elsewhere? What if simply taking the time to listen is what convinces the client that their relationship matters?

Consider a financial advisor who emails a market update instead of calling a client or an accountant who answers a complicated question with an email rather than talking through the implications. The email may save time, but is it worth the cost in trust?

Also consider that emails and text messages can often create more questions than they answer. What starts as a quick message can lead to confusion, frustration, and a long chain of back-and-forth that could have been resolved with a simple phone call or, better yet, a face-to-face conversation. What may feel like the more efficient option in the moment can become inefficient in the end.

Apply these Principals Directly to Business

For success in business, you cannot rely solely on email or other digital communication. Sometimes, you must take the extra step and meet with a client face-to-face. Nothing replaces the personal touch of taking time out of your day to sit across the table from someone to learn more about them, understand their role, and gain a deeper perspective on their organization.

That investment sends a message that you are interested in more than the matter at hand, and you want to understand their business, challenges, and goals. It also demonstrates that your relationship isn't transactional; rather, you see yourself as an extension of their team and are genuinely invested in their organization's success.

Naturally, in-person meetings are not always possible. Geography, schedules, travel, and other demands can make getting together in person difficult, and sometimes, a client or colleague simply prefers the flexibility of a virtual meeting.

When that is the case, platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and other digital conferencing software can still provide many of the benefits of face-to-face communication. Seeing someone's expression, hearing their voice, and having a more personal, real-time conversation can create a level of connection that email and text simply cannot.

The goal should never be to force someone to meet in person; it is to be intentional about how we communicate and to recognize when a personal connection can make a difference. I have yet to schedule an in-person meeting where the person I was meeting with was not grateful that I took the time to physically be there.

Be Intentional When Your Interactions Are Virtual

If you are on a virtual meeting, turn on your camera when appropriate. Be present. Put the phone down, step away from the other screens and distractions, look at the person you are speaking with, and give them your full attention.

It may seem like a small gesture, but it sends a meaningful message: You have my attention, I am here, and you and what you have to say matters.

When everyone is engaged and present, even a virtual meeting can feel more personal and productive. You can see facial expressions, recognize reactions, pick up on body language, and have a better sense of whether someone is engaged, confused, excited, or hesitant. Most importantly, you are reminded that there is a person on the other side of the screen.

At the End of the Day, It's About People

Rather than simply exchanging information, sitting across from another person is an opportunity to build rapport, listen differently, and read the room. It is an opportunity to build the kind of personal connection that can turn a transaction into a relationship, a colleague into a trusted partner, and a client into a long-term advocate.

Technology has made communication faster, and AI is making it more efficient, but neither should come at the expense of being human.

The question for businesses isn't whether we should embrace technology. We should. The question is whether, in doing so, we will forget the extraordinary value of simply sitting across the table from another person and talking or, when we can't be there in person, making the effort to be fully present with them virtually.

The most valuable thing you can give someone isn't another email, another message, or another virtual meeting. It's your time, your presence, your attention, and the willingness to simply show up.

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