

Technology Limits Your Ability to Think and Communicate

Tom Northup June 2013

Outstanding leaders understand communication is a powerful factor in determining their career success and in shaping the nature and quality of organizational effectiveness. There is a direct correlation between personal success and your individual level of interpersonal communication.

Can you imagine life without computers, electronic organizers, cell phones, or high speed internet?

Many of us may not remember the tools that dominated the workplace 25 years ago, the typewriters, carbon paper, desk-bound phones, and desk calculators that technology promised to eliminate or make more efficient.

Has technology lived up to this promise to improve our work life?

Recent research finds that people complete less work in a day than they did a decade ago and that the number of people who call themselves successful has dropped 30%.

What changed a few years ago? E-mail, computer messages, cell phone calls and voice mails began their relentless bombardment of American workers. The promised new efficiency became a thousand fold increase in the number of items competing for our attention.

Loren Ekroth, Ph.D. a specialist in human communication and an expert on conversation has written:

"If you are constantly distracted, whether by buzzing mosquitos or electronic devices, at least three things happen that damage your communication."

1. **You have no time to think straight and concentrate, so your expressed thoughts may be incomplete or garbled.**

"Nobody can think anymore because they're constantly interrupted," this according to Leslie Perlow, a Harvard Business School professor and author of "Sleeping With Your Smartphone." Further, she says that "Technology has enabled this expectation that we always be on."

"In the workplace, electronic communication tools can demand constant switching, which contributed to a feeling of "discontinuity."

"A simple example from yesteryear: Remember when you were deep in thought, trying to deal with some difficult issue and then your phone rang?"

You picked up your phone and had a brief conversation. Then when you tried to get back to your earlier train of thought, you probably had trouble reconnecting and wondered "Now, where was I?"

2. **You have trouble giving your full attention to a person you're talking with.**

"With only partial attention, understanding their ideas is difficult, and empathizing with them is impossible. Empathy requires the ability to imagine yourself in another's place and sense what they must be feeling. Empathy requires that both your head and heart be involved.

When I observe groups around a restaurant table, I often see at least a few of them involved with their mobile device. Sometimes they are texting the person sitting across the table from them! Although they are digitally communicating, they are omitting most sensory channels for full conversation."

3. You may miss creative possibilities that can happen in an actual face-to-face, unrehearsed conversation.

“An engaged conversation with full self-expression requires sustained attention and spontaneous reactions. Such collaborative expressing between two or more people just might turn up something new - a really bright idea. It may sometimes seem messy and old-fashioned, but it can be wonderfully productive.

I recognize that some workers fear repercussions if they are not "always on" in the workplace, at home, and even on vacations. You might ask for a more reasonable system so that you can have quality personal time and don't have to sleep with your smart phone.”¹

Connectedness offers great potential and can increase our effectiveness. The old barriers of proximity and time no longer constrain us. We can reach others when we are not physically close and we have instant communication across multiple time zones. We need to learn how to use connectedness to our advantage and not allow technology to control us.

Madisyn Taylor, editor of *The Daily Om* newsletter, offers this good counsel: "Most gadgets are generally meant to improve the quality of our lives, but it is when we spend too much time with them that they actually do the opposite. By always using our portable e-mailers, cell phones, video games, and surfing the Internet, we actually become less connected and more distracted. By becoming aware of these tendencies, we harness the power to overcome them and make better choices for ourselves and our families."

Successful leaders understand how to use technology effectively. These leaders generate outstanding results.

When we use text, email and voice mail as a substitute for face to face communication, we do not communicate at the level of in-depth understanding and shared commitment. Not communicating face to face limits our effectiveness and the ability to effect results. When we are not face to face we miss tones, inflections and non-verbal cues. Good communication requires good listening skills and goes well beyond hearing what is said.

Empathy requires active listening and is all about asking questions to probe and clarify the information you have heard and to delve into unspoken areas. We cannot do this with technology. Without face to face interaction we cannot have in-depth give and take to fully expand our ideas.

The highest value of effective communications is the ability to develop best thinking by drawing on the full talents, experience and education of all employees. Face to face conversations are the best way to develop in-depth best thinking. High level best thinking never happens in a vacuum; we must have continuous dialog with others.

High tech equipment has not fulfilled its promise to streamline work. Our connectedness and multi-tasking used improperly has actually reduced success. We regularly interrupt ourselves and as a result lose focus and the ability to complete tasks in a timely manner.

"Communication is the glue that holds organizations together."

1. Loren Ekroth, <http://www.conversationmatters.com/>