

Psychology Today



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Mobile Devices and Corporate Culture

Usage alters customer and employee thinking patterns

The CEO across the table from us was furious. He was seeking to consummate a deal with the CEO of another company and wanted to get confirmation that the deal was “on.” He had used his mobile device to send an email to the CEO asking for a status report. No response. He sent a text message. No response.

Embedded in this executive’s anger were the following assumptions.

If I send an electronic communication, it will be sent to the right address.

If my electronic communication is sent, it will be received.

My electronic communications will be read shortly after my having sent it.

My electronic communications will not be accidentally deleted.

Electronic communications are the appropriate communications vehicle to discuss something that might require a conversation.

When such assumptions are shared by others, then corporate culture is impacted.

Are We Managing Our Mobile Devices or Are Mobile Devices Managing Us?

Sherry Turkle is the Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology in the Program in Science, Technology, and Society at MIT. She received a joint doctorate in sociology and personality psychology from Harvard University and is a licensed clinical psychologist. Her book Reclaiming Conversation is a well written, lucid, and research-oriented exploration about people's relationship with their mobile devices.

Consider this: those who are entering the work force in the developed world today have never been without mobile devices. Does constant exposure to mobile devices as an extension of each employee change thinking patterns?

Talking Versus Conversation:

It is easier to send an electronic message than to arrange a face-to-face meeting or a telephone call. Most employees automatically go with the easier form of communication. Professor Turkle agrees that this is a way of talking. But it is not communication.

Talking is about sending information one way. Confirming a date for a meeting is a good use for emails. Communication, on the other hand, is to be "fully present to one another. It is there we develop the capacity for empathy. It's where we experience the job of being heard, of being understood. And conversation advances self-reflection."

Texting is not conversation.

The paradox of mobile devices is that it allows us to hide from each other even as we are constantly connected to each other.

She sees young people actively engaged in a “flight from conversation.” And yet it is in conversations that the creative collaboration of work thrives.

Your Mobile Devices: Symbol of Non-Conversation.

A client sent us an email as she was in the playground with her eight year old daughter. For her this simple act is an example of good multitasking. How long would it take for the daughter to realize that her mother was not “with” her?

Even the sight of a silent mobile devices on a table sends a signal to others in the room that you are expecting an important call. If we think we might be interrupted, we tend to keep the conversations light.

The most effective communicators we know take out their mobile devices and show us that they are turning it off. They then put it into their brief cases. This is a symbolic act that says: “I am truly with you. You are the most important item on my agenda right now.”

A client proudly spoke about his new digital watch. It has a blue tooth connection to his mobile device. Instead of picking up his mobile device and examining the screen every time he gets a call, there would be a slight buzz on his wrist. He thinks he can discretely gaze at his watch to see if the call is important enough to interrupt the meeting he is having. What assumptions does this client about the inability of colleagues and customers to not understand the meaning of gazing at a smart watch?

Crisis of Empathy.

Talking is not conversation. Using a team meeting as an opportunity to empty your email inbox is not listening. Limiting your sources of information to news feeds that happen to provide only information that reinforces your opinions is not openness to new ideas.

As we isolate ourselves we begin to lose empathy.

The lack of empathy is in your office right now: good people in accounting who sincerely fail to understand problems faced by manufacturing, underwriters who sincerely fail to appreciate the problems of sales professionals.

For all its value, mobile devices may re-wire our brains to make us less empathic.

Dr. Turkle calls this the “Goldilocks effect.”

Face-to-face communication increases the chances of getting too close or disrupting one’s deeply held beliefs. Online communication avoids these things from happening. Digital relationships are not too close or too far. Digital relationships are just right for people.

The problem with the Goldilocks effect is that true innovation require human relationships. And human relationships are information rich, messy, and demanding. Technology moves us away from meaningful conversation to the efficiencies of connection.

Action Item #1: Bring People “Home” to Work:

Dr. Turkle describes the experience of Radnor Partners, a high tech consulting firm. Since the 1990’s it had encouraged telecommuting as a method of reducing costs while improving employee morale. This is the “common sense” of the management today.

The CEO, on the other hand, saw the extensive use of virtual meetings as people talking without really communicating. Real communication takes place in over dining room tables, in parking lots, in hallways, in bathrooms, and by copy machines.

Radnor Partners did away with virtual commuting and required office presence. Physical proximity sparked new conversations. When analysts, sales people, and consultants began working in the same space, Radnor began to grow at five times its former rate.

Action Item 2: Show Your Team

They Don't Live in a Binary World

The digital world is based on a technology involving splitting data into binary forms. Information is often presented in the digital world as a succession of binary decisions called Menus. Over time, this way of looking at the digital world influences the way we look at the real world. The middle ground disappears. We cannot see the gray spaces. There is polarization of options.

In time a binary perspective infects business decisions. You know it has reached an infection when your competitors are described as “stupid,” “unethical,” while your side is “strategic” and “customer-focused.” No professional football coach would think of the opposition team in such binary terms. And yet we permit it in business.

Ask people to play “Devil’s Advocate” and make a strong case for the very proposition they are arguing against.

“Tools Down:”

We all have had the experience of being at team meetings where participants are monitoring their mobile devices. If challenged they might state that they are perfectly competent to multi-task despite the research evidence that the cerebral cortex is designed to be poor at multi-taking. Set norms that people may not multi task at team meetings.

For example, consider people who open their lap tops at team meetings and take notes.

According to Dr. Turkle, these people have moved from participants to transcriber roles. If called upon to make a comment about the ideas in the room, they often get angry because they have been “interrupted” in their task of taking down notes.

It is not enough to ask participants turn their phones off. Ask them to deposit their computers and mobile devices on a table away from the desk. Good intentions will not overcome years of learned habit.

At the same time, do not put your employees in a situation that they are away from their phones for sixty minutes. They cannot tolerate being away from their devices for 60 minutes. Have a ten minute break after forty minutes of conversation.

Have Conversations with People You Don't Agree With:

The internet allows us to limit interaction to people we agree with and only hear information we wish to hear. Life may be cozy that way but it does not help your effectiveness. You need to reach out and have conversations with the people you disagree with and appreciate their perspective.

For example, when we give a seminar at a conference, we ask people to sit next to someone they do not know and arranger for exercises where there will be communications.

An Example with Professional Service Firms:

Many of our clients are professional service firms that have a track to partnership. After proving technical competence, the next hurdle to partnership involves proving business development capability.

Usually in the third or fourth year after receipt of one's professional degree, associates have achieved this first hurdle.

We recommend that our client firms hold a small celebration and provide these associates with the new title, Senior Associate.

These Senior Associates have been connected to mobile devices since childhood. Their ideas about effective communications may not be the same as yours. They may have developed a set of behavioral habits around communications that worked well for them as students and as

associates. But as Senior Associates, these same behaviors may limit their abilities to generate new client revenue. It is the responsibility of firm leadership to help Senior Associates manage their mobile devices in a way that fosters effective communication with prospective clients.

It is the responsibility of leadership to define corporate culture and not have technology define it for them.

Conclusions.

Common sense says that using the latest technology is a good thing. But it is not a binary good thing.

Personal technology needs to be managed deliberately to enhance effective communications. In itself, this technology changes the way we think and act towards each other and towards a complex world.

Reference:

Turkle, S. (2015). Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age. Penguin.

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Maryanne Peabody and Larry Stybel are co-founders of Boston-based Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc., an Arbora Global Company. Clients include 21% of the one hundred companies named "Best Employers in the United States." Its mission is "Leadership and Career Success:" retained search, coaching, and outplacement for senior leaders.