

Interpersonal communication - Technology vs Face to Face

Why heavy reliance on technology is changing the way we communicate in the workplace

*"The ability to express complex ideas with clarity and simplicity, to communicate one-on-one, within small groups and to larger groups, all in an engaging and accessible way – these skills are not common." **Mike Fenlon, US Chief People Officer for PWC***

The Core Business Skill

Interpersonal skills are learnable social behaviours that are used to achieve many business outcomes. Because organisational structures are becoming flatter and with more service-oriented positions, these skills have become increasingly important. And since excellent interpersonal skills facilitate successful interactions, it follows that they also lead to better work outcomes. At the heart of the matter, good interpersonal skills lead to better communication between colleagues and clients, and there is no area of an employee's life that cannot be improved by being able to communicate effectively.

Millennials and Generation Z in the workplace – Digital Natives

Adults who've grown up in the Age of the Internet experience the world differently from those that have gone before. This especially affects the way they communicate. Digital Natives say they're comfortable working with older generations and value mentors. But almost half felt that their managers did not always understand the way they use technology at work.¹

Digital Natives prefer to solve their work or personal problems at a distance via social media. These young adults are already in or entering the workplace, where their lack of basic interpersonal skills is proving a hindrance for their employers. Emojis are fine when you're chatting socially on Facebook, but in the workplace when you're involved in a negotiation or trying to assemble a team meeting, they're regarded as unprofessional.

Interpersonal skills prior to the internet

Prior to the internet and social media, we interacted with a very limited number of people – mainly those we knew in person. So virtually all communication took place face to face, and we used the same social skills again and again. Today it's possible to interact with literally thousands of humans who might be scattered all over the world. The most striking thing about how we communicate these days is that there's no filter on what we say or the way in which we say it. As social media has flourished to become one of the most dominant ways people communicate, human communication has suffered because heavy users of technology are not able to practice those essential skills. And it's a growing problem...

¹ Millennials at Work – Reshaping the Workplace | PWC

Loss of social skills amongst teenagers and young adults

Today in the UK, 90% of young adults (18-29) have a social media account. On average, teenagers are online almost nine hours a day, not including time for homework. ²

Kristin Carothers, a clinical psychologist with the Child Mind Institute in New York City, believes that the fervent use of phones and social media is causing a loss of social skills. Carothers reports that frequent virtual interactions through social media lack emotion, and when coming face-to-face with a person, frequent users of social media may “*miss some social cues.*” She reports that as a result, the quality of relationships may not be as great as those that are based on face-to-face socializing. A problem that arises from this is that “*young people may become confused about what an actual relationship is.*” ³

The rise of the emoticon

In the Digital Age, how can emotion be conveyed with just typed words? It’s long been understood in business that emails are a very blunt instrument. The emotion behind typed words, or apparent lack of emotion, can easily be misinterpreted. To rectify this difficulty (on social media at least), new forms of expressing emotion have evolved in the form of emoticons which are commonly used in online communication. But none of these are very appropriate in the work environment nor as impactful as being in the room (or on Zoom) so people can see how you look, hear the tone of your voice and experience what you mean with gestures or body language.

What skills will help Digital Natives the most?

The soft skills gaps most likely to trip up young workers include written and oral communications, the ability to engage, motivate, display business etiquette and professionalism. Millennials who’ve grown up communicating among close peers – and mostly through their smartphones – must learn to embrace the perspectives of those who they’re talking to. “*Relationship-building is key,*” says Paul McDonald, a senior executive director of employment consultants Robert Half International. “*Young people need to be aware that they’ll be working with not just one or two people – it’s everyone.*”

“*A number of critical skills truly make people stand out,*” comments Mike Fenlon, US Chief People Officer for PWC, writing about Millennials in work.

Mentoring may be more important to Digital Natives than it was to any 20th century generation of white-collar workers. Therefore, pairing new hires up with someone who has the communication skills you want the young worker to embody, may be an excellent strategy.

² American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry
https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Social-Media-and-Teens-100.aspx

³ Connecticut Health I-Team | <http://c-hit.org/2015/08/20/is-social-media-hindering-our-face-to-face-social-skills/>

Finally, if you have employees lacking in the human skills mentioned in this paper, the good news is that social or interpersonal skills are all *learned skills*. I know because I've been mentoring the mentors and teaching similar skills to generations of workers for the last 22 years. In every case, what I learned was that employees can be deeply empowered when they can learn the fundamentals of effective communication. Great communication gives the employee confidence, meaning and the ability to form powerful relationships that should boost their chances of long-term success.

These are all solvable problems. To find out more I'd be delighted to arrange a Zoom call. I can be reached at: info@commcrunch.com