

The Costs of Digital Communication: A Q&A

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People would rather text than talk on the phone. This is what Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Sherry Turkle explained in her 2011 book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. She studied the consequences of our want to avoid face-to-face conversations in her 2015 book, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*.

In the following paragraphs, Sherry Turkle explains why digital-only communication is bad for relationships and business.

How has communication changed over the past decade?

We are moving away from in-person conversation. People would rather edit what they say and then send it in a text. They don't like the vulnerability of talking in-person because it's in real time and they can't control it.

Even when we do talk face to face, we are splitting our attention between the people in the room with us and the ones on our phones. Communication happens, but it is all chopped up. We have gotten into a habit of stopping in-person conversation to respond to a text or check something on our phone.

What are the consequences of this shifting focus?

First, the quality of our conversations gets worse. Even when a silent phone is put on a table, people will talk about less important things. This makes sense because no one wanted to talk about more important subjects because the phone could interrupt them at any time. People avoided deep conversations because someone on the phone could interrupt them at any time.

Second, our commitment to the other person in the conversation goes down. We have a lot of other possibilities for people to talk with or things to do because they are on the phone.

Third, there's less engagement and shared experience. At many companies, it is common for people to read e-mails and messages right in the middle of meetings. We are denying others our attention—and we know it. We don't have the sense of community and togetherness that comes from participating together.

What are the business advantages of face-to-face communication?

People that work at companies that encourage conversations are more productive. They're happier, too. Part of what makes them want to come to work is the face-to-face conversations with other people. (This is true about schools too. Students and teachers like being able to interact with their peers.) Some places have underestimated the joy that people take in being part of a community and how much they learn in random chats with others.

Why is digital communication so attractive to people?

People feel overwhelmed by the demands on them. They believe that if they stay isolated (alone) behind their screens—like pilots in a cockpit—they will do their work better. They don't think they can risk having a conversation that might go on too long. They are scared of "real time." To protect themselves, they stay behind the screens and in their "cockpits."

Is videoconferencing equivalent to face-to-face communication?

No! In conversation, eye contact is crucial. To make it look like eye contact on Skype, Zoom, or Google Meet, I have to stare at the little camera on the top of the computer. In other words, to make it look like I am making eye contact, I end up seeing nothing on the screen. Of course, when people are scattered around or can't be together in person, videoconferencing is unavoidable. You have to use the tools available. What I am arguing against is what has become common—for example, e-mailing or texting someone in the same hall as you instead of talking to them in person.

How can HR (human resource) professionals encourage face-to-face exchanges?

Make sure you make it clear that you value conversation. Talking in person increases productivity and creativity. Make sure there are physical spaces to encourage people to talk, like conversational seating. You have to make it clear that people should not be on their computers all the time. You can have device-free time where everyone puts away their computers and cell phones. At first, this might be hard, but it becomes rewarding as people become more present in the room and pay more attention to each other.