

Talking Heads – How losing social skills will be our road to nowhere...

By Steve Bernard

Well it's official – we have reached a watershed moment in society. For the first time ever, a ¼ of our mobile phone usage is not for talking to others verbally. Instead according to a recent Deloitte trend report, we prefer now to use them for texts, email, gaming and entertainment viewing. While the technological advances are truly admirable, we are also in danger of losing something very precious that may cost us dearly both socially and economically.

Along with other commentators, I view this as a dangerous development that nobody is seizing upon and could change our social and business landscape forever. It is our social skills, innate human abilities and emotions that make a huge difference to our sense of self, our wellbeing and tangible outcomes at work when dealing with others.

Having interacted with 100s of senior executives from all sectors over the last 18 years there are a number of irrepressible trends and fashions. There has been a head long rush for more and more operational efficiency, cost reduction, improvements in financial and other instantly measurable results. *"If it reduces my costs or overhead, if it gives me higher sales or simplifies the process – just do it"* is the mantra. This is easy to understand and empathise with; we all understand the global reality and pressures of competition, coping with a very changeable world. But what did we miss in the race to the bottom?



We've always believed that effective relationships get results. Think about it, whether you are the Flight Crew piloting a 747, the Front of House Team at McDonalds serving burgers or a FTSE 100 Executive Team constructing the 5-year plan, if you get the relationships right, the rest either takes care of itself or is significantly more straight forward and fulfilling.



We are in danger of giving up too much ground to technology, where human interaction and intuition currently plays a vital role. We are building robots that can recognise emotions from facial expressions, computers are beating professional players at Go (look it up) and futurologists are predicting the demise of many finance and IT careers through automated analysis. The journalist and broadcaster Anthony Hilton, writing on the topic, gave a great example of the imperative of human interaction. He references an interview with a 'dull insurance executive' inquiring about his qualifications for the post. The manager immediately talked about the ability to 'read people'. He knew if a colleague was on side or if they had real doubts about whether a strategy could be successfully implemented. We really shouldn't be surprised about the hard evidence that underpins the success many achieve through their people and relationship skills. In our business, we often use a quote by arguably the world's first ever billionaire, ***"The ability to deal with people is as purchasable a commodity as sugar or coffee and I will pay more for that ability than for any other under the sun."*** John D Rockefeller



Rockefeller was on to something back then and we doubt even now he would swap his intuition and ability to get people onside for an iPad or robot analyst. When building or growing an organisation there are still a number of assets and advantages not to lose sight of:

- **Ability to read people:** Soliciting the real views and opinions of colleagues and partners to ascertain their assessment of risk and suitability of design, strategies, work schemes and projects
- **Gaining buy in:** Winning people's confidence to the point they give some form of tangible commitment that they then act upon and follow through.
- **Learn from others:** Building knowledge, skill and expertise from others through social interaction and creating a safe environment to interact.
- **Making better decisions:** Seeking vital input from a diverse group of people in order to effectively derive an overall assessment of the suitability of ideas and options. The ability to build complex scenarios and 3D or 'rich picture' maps about an organisation or its market.
- **Achieve something greater together:** The ability to achieve a superordinate or more ambitious goal through collaboration. Achieving stretch targets without additional risk.
- **Faster problem solving:** Saving significant management or functional expertise time by having others support diagnosis and analysis together. Ability to stay on plan and hit delivery and financial targets without losing out on quality or customer satisfaction.
- **Innovation:** Creating breakthrough thinking and new ideas or solutions but constructively mixing inputs and clashing points of view. Gaining territory or ground against competitors or creating new products and IP.

So why is it that we're not all running to the defence of social skills and not rioting about the takeover of human territory? The truth is we're all inherently lazy; we're actually quite comfortable letting machines take over in many instances, and, we don't yet fully see the dangers of going too far. In addition, the merits of analysis and technical thinking has been hugely overplayed. Don't get me wrong, the S.T.E.M. industries should be a key strategy in the growth of the economic landscape, but we mustn't lose what's special about the more human areas, e.g. service industries, start-up / entrepreneurial thinking and the creative industries.

Take a moment and ask yourself:

- How often do you see your key colleagues face to face on a monthly basis?
- Proportionally what's the split of 'screen time' using a computer, phone vs. 'face time' on a daily basis?
- When was the last time you spent time really listening to a team member to solicit how they felt about a key project?
- In a week how many times do you ask others at work you can access for help problem solving when you're stuck?
- Before making a key decision, how many people's opinions did you check first, even if just to validate your own view?
- How many of your existing portfolio of projects and work plans are fully on time and working to budget or even exceeding expectations?
- When was the last time you were creative with others in a collaborative session?

The ironies and risks are all around us; Head teachers whose classrooms are fully interactive whiteboards and tablets but who complain about antisocial behaviour being on the rise, companies that don't advocate team face to face team meetings but face rising incidences of workplace conflicts and the need for increasing wellbeing solutions, mediation and stress management. Why don't we let technology be confined to fighting cancer, preventing road accidents or reshaping very dangerous jobs? That way we can get on with the being and the doing of human stuff!

<http://www.standard.co.uk/comment/anthony-hilton-we-ll-be-losing-so-much-if-we-stop-talking-face-to-face-a3156536.html>

<http://www.deloitte.co.uk/mobileuk/>

