

ARE WE REALLY GAINING CONNECTIVITY?



JAMES WARNER

The obvious answer is yes, but I sometimes wonder if we're not losing connectivity at the same time. We are now fully "connected" electronically (or expected to be) virtually all the time. With our modern smartphones, we can talk to anyone, and share pictures and even real-time video of events as they are occurring most anywhere in the world. With the Internet, we can find

the answer to virtually any question nearly instantly and usually free of charge. Individuals can be "on call" or available at all times, and I find many who expect a reply within hours, if not minutes. The advantages are extraordinary, especially to this old guy who remembers having to always have a pocket full of dimes in order to run to the nearest pay phone to find out why the concrete truck is late or to order a cleanup load.

But...the deluge of e-mails, texts, calls, and being ever available can confound one's creative thinking. I really believe people need time to escape from the bustle of business and find silent space to contemplate, think, and dream. A good example is Albert Einstein. His work history started as a clerk in a patent office in Switzerland, where he was so well-organized that he often finished his work early. With no phones or other interruptions, much time was left for deep thinking, and so came the theory of relativity.

My favorite example is the experience of Walt Disney who, as with us all, had more than a few problems and less than wonderful experiences in building his enterprise, but in quiet contemplation during one of the worst, he came up with Mickey Mouse. "He popped out of my mind onto a drawing pad, on a boring train ride from Manhattan to Hollywood at a time when business fortunes of my brother Roy and myself were at lowest ebb and disaster seemed right around the corner...Born of necessity, the little fellow literally freed us of immediate worry. He provided the means for expanding our organization to its present dimensions and for extending the medium cartoon animation towards new entertainment levels."

I often see people in meetings looking down, obviously at their phones. Sometimes they will text return messages, though

keeping the phone out of sight in their lap, and sometimes leave the room to carry on a conversation. How can one give his best attention to the subject at hand, if dealing with umpteen other less important things as well?

And is constant connectivity really needed? I started not only before cell phones, but even before two-way radios. Once available, we were early to acquire radios, which at the time required drilling a hole through the auto body for the antenna, which of course detracted from the resale value. The radios were well worth their cost, especially in relaying messages to a batch plant or other participants, but as "the boss," I received endless inquiries from my people in the field, nearly always concerned with things they could work out on their own. It became somewhat of a nuisance, but more importantly, I believe, inhibited thinking and growth of the individual employee; why think on your own, or take a usually small risk, if you can easily put it on the boss? It's good for the moment, but a huge detriment to upward mobility of the individual. And while it might have saved a little time or cost at the moment, in the long term, it was not good for the firm to have people marginalizing themselves. A successful firm requires good people who can think and work out problems on their own.

After a few years, when it came time to replace the auto, I decided not to drill an antenna hole and to let go the radio. Yes, there were a few instances when it would have been best had I been instantly connected, but the overall result for the firm was much better growth in the ability of our people.

Let us not become so connected that we deny ourselves time to contemplate, think, and dream!

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