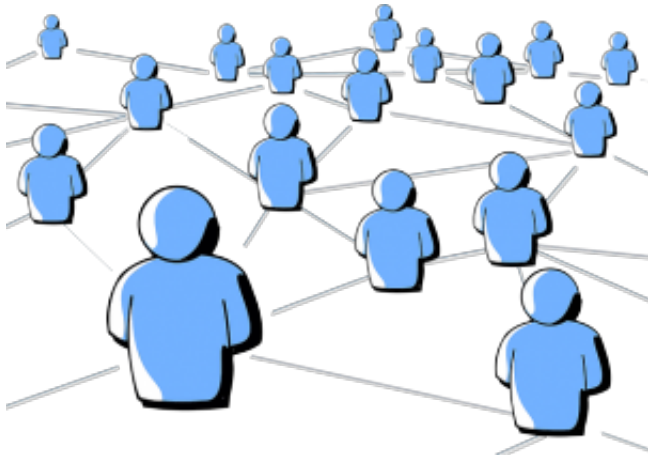


Human Connections Are More Important Than Digital Ones



Which would you prefer: meeting for a quick cup of coffee with a friend or spending the same amount of time texting back and forth about the same topic? Chances are that most of us would prefer the first but usually end up doing the second. But can 10 texts really equal a face to face exchange? Can an emoji replace the smile and the look in the eyes of a friend? Is a network the same as a community?

In recent years, our human interactions have become eroded by modern technology in almost all areas of our lives. Shops have replaced friendly cashiers with self-checkout lanes, airports helpful check-in staff with machines, at work we have virtual meetings and we now communicate primarily through writing. However, without hearing the tone of voice and registering the subtleties of body language, the written words can often quite easily be misinterpreted. Speaking to someone in person will usually give us a much more accurate understanding of a situation and even business has started to understand that the secret to success lies in human connection. When there is belonging there is engagement, and when there is engagement there is productivity.

There is little doubt about the positive effects of modern technology. The possibility of building global networks, maintaining long-distance friendships and communicating quickly with many people at once are just some of its advantages. However, the sad truth is that for all the social media friends we may have, studies have shown that the circle of friends and confidants has shrunk dramatically over the past two decades and that as a result people are finding themselves lonelier than ever. Nearly a quarter of those surveyed say they have no close friends or confidants at all – a 14% increase since we all became so digitally connected.

Modern technology has also changed dating and our intimate relationships. You may have heard of 'situationships' - a rather confusing phenomenon of modern dating. These are noncommittal 'relationships' that are so completely undefined that those who are in one don't know whether they are in a relationship or not. It is more than a friendship but not quite a relationship, which means that there are no clear boundaries and therefore allows people to get away with some very bad behaviour indeed. What a sure recipe for a lot of heartache, for a roller coaster of hope and disappointment, for uncertainty when we are all craving some form of stability and certainty! The philosopher and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman speaks about 'liquid love' – a metaphor for the increasingly brief and superficial encounters that characterise

modern love and the frailty of human bonds.

There are many studies that show how important human contact is for our health. Strong social connections lead to a 50% increased chance of longevity, strengthen our immune systems and improve our physical and psychological well-being. Their absence is of greater detriment to health than obesity, smoking and high blood pressure, and the emotional impacts of loneliness can actually trigger cellular changes that alter the gene expressions in our bodies.

We are profoundly social beings. Brene Brown, professor and author of many popular books, says: “A deep sense of love and belonging is an irresistible need of all people. When those needs are not met, we don’t function as we were meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache. We hurt others. We get sick.”

The late poet and philosopher John O’Donohue wrote: “In this post-modern world the hunger to belong has rarely been more intense, more urgent. [...] And although technology pretends to unite us, more often than not all it delivers are simulated images that distance us from our lives. The ‘global village’ has no roads or neighbours; it is a faceless, impersonal landscape from which all individuality has been erased.”

No matter how much technology we will have in the future, some things will remain fundamental, and a deep connection between human beings is one of them. But it seems that digital connection has negatively impacted our ability to connect. So, don’t wait for others to take the first step. Open your heart, dare to make yourself vulnerable and treat others how you would like to be treated yourself.