

# The End of Communicating in Presence?

by

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In this hurried world, face-to-face or phone conversation is a premium reward. The physical or emotional representation of the person surfaces as does the opportunity to have presence with each other. The social brain engages in each of us – picking up information in each moment of need, hearing a voice, grasping the emotion and nonverbal messages. The social brain then tells us what to do next in keeping the interaction moving. Unfortunately, having presence with another is becoming a secondary approach to communication. The capacity, speed and frequency of electronic applications are quietly but firmly replacing the most critical attribute of human interdependency – having presence with others. Sadly enough, the acceleration of forward thinking communication technology seems to be abandoning presence, is inappropriately used at times.

My sister and I have frequent morning conversations over the phone. This communication presence started years ago after moving a great distance from each other. The verbal interaction offered a pleasant relief to the *miss you* syndrome as well as ongoing family updates. Our calls were meaningful and always left each of us looking forward to the next call. Interestingly enough, in the recent past I heard from another family member that my sister's granddaughter had married. I immediately phoned my sister seeking clarity and *why didn't you tell me* of the marriage. Her response, ...*didn't you read it on Facebook?* I was dumbfounded. Had I missed something?

Or, how about the young man and user of many technical resources that I met after a recent presentation? In a prolonged conversation, we dove deeply into a dialogue on communication. He felt very strongly about the use of email and text messaging as the stronger resource in human communication. He then shifted into a stronger belief that anyone interrupting his texting is being rude. At this point my head was spinning with what if questions and an aggressive intent to challenge his belief.

In my client base, I am increasingly finding management levels pre-occupied with texting and emails in meetings and one-on-ones. In an interview with a cross section of client employees, I found their major concern was their boss's constant texting while attempting to interact with employees. Some employees even mentioned that the texting was not always work related. In an earlier article I wrote about leadership communication, *Disengaging a Workplace: A Case Study*, I mentioned that some employees found this offensive and were irritated when the manager interrupts a conversation to answer a cell phone email or a text message.

The inappropriate use of mentioned technology disrupts communication and removes the potential of meaningful interaction.

The concept of continuous partial attention was used by Linda Stone, research specialist. She commented that *...many people in the technology industry tend to work with a split focus, concentrating on a top level item while also receiving partial input from a variety of other sources*. Although some have labeled this action as multi-tasking, Stone has relabeled it as “continuous partial attention” to describe this ongoing behavior/practice.

The cause of continuous partial attention is a desire to have inclusion on everything. Even the frequency of manager’s checking email to monitor business interactions and communication is immeasurable. However, many employees believe that continuous partial attention is simply a contemporary approach of not paying attention, with people focusing on too many things at once. In turn little attention is given to individual needs or work focus. As one employee commented, *I felt like I was silently dismissed so I left the room*.

The millennium generation seems to be a strong proponent of continuous partial attention. They are in work environments where it is not only encouraged, but expected. There are numerous examples from the corporate world, where some companies now confiscate communication devices at the door of meetings to avoid the problem of partial attention. These meetings are often coined as *above the waist* meetings where technical communication resources are not permitted.

Some people view continuous partial attention as a necessity; they believe it increases work communication flow and effectiveness while others believe that it is less than positive, contributes to stressful conditions and negative effects. To be sure, there are some critics who view continuous partial attention as a problem. They perceive it as *continuous partial relationships* that describe the interaction some people have with each other in *an age of continuous partial attention*.

Summing it up, the future of communication presence is in the balance. Each of us has the choice of how we want to communicate with others and the approach we want to use. However, a powerful question remains – can we take the time and wisely choose the opportunity of presence as the predominate approach to communicate? The end is far from near. Hopefully your choice will be to keep presence alive and thriving in meaningful interactions.