

The Inverse Relationship Between Technology and Soft Skills

April 4, 2014

I'm hearing stories from students these days that I would never have predicted fifteen years ago. Females in a sorority recently said they all shower with their cell phones. Yep. They put them in a plastic bag and place them on the soap dish so they don't miss one text, Instagram or Snapchat. Most students I know sleep with their cell phones, and they even both launch or terminate dating relationships with a text.

Over the last twenty-five years, our world's been introduced to personal computers, cell phones and email. Today, these and other forms of technology are central to our everyday life. As a result, you and I are both the beneficiaries and victims of an entirely new world. Most of us have observed the upsides and the downsides of this. I have a love/hate relationship with it. I've noodled on how to manage it, knowing it's not going away and has fundamentally changed the way we interact with people. And the changes haven't always been good.

Some Helpful Equations

Case in point: Executives today bemoan the poor soft skills in young graduates. I am asked all the time how to understand and navigate this shift. While I don't claim to be an expert on the issue, let me offer some equations that could help you grasp both the skill sets and the need for training in your youngest employees:

1. As technology goes up, empathy goes down.

Over the last ten years, empathy levels among college students has dropped by 40%. At the same time, we've seen a rise in bullying incidents, both on and off school campuses. We can find a direct parallel between screen time and the lack of empathy in adolescents. It makes sense, doesn't it? A text that says "I'm having a bad day" doesn't elicit the same empathy as being face to face with a person in tears, in the midst of a crisis. It seems virtual... so our empathy is virtual. Kids often laugh at what they cried about a decade ago.

2. As information expands, attentions spans diminish.

A comparative study was done with Singapore and U.S. students. When given a math word-problem that was two-grade levels above their current position, Singapore students labored an hour before succeeding or giving up. On average, the American students spent a total of 34 seconds on the problem before giving up. Resilience, patience, and attention spans have dropped thanks to today's quick, convenient, and saturated world. When overwhelmed, we surrender readily. Herbert Simon said it best: "A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention."

3. As options broaden, long-term commitment shrinks.

As mentioned above, our world is overloaded with options: content to watch, music to listen to, things to purchase... you name it. With so much variety, we tend to quit current options when new or novel ones surface. And let's get honest: It happens with marriages, cars, teams and jobs, too. We've conditioned kids to think like "free agents." There are even countries today proposing legislation for two-year marriage contracts. Survey's show today's college students expect to have not just five jobs, but five careers before they're done. Get ready.

4. As life speeds up, patience and personal discipline drop.

I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I am less patient than I was several years ago. Why? I don't have to wait to satisfy as many of my wants—from banking transactions, to food prep, to answers I need. I have a Google reflex. Studies now indicate that the declines in discipline and work ethic that have crept into our society have had an impact on the ratings of our students internationally. Our brains work like a muscle. If solutions come easy, that muscle doesn't get a workout, and it atrophies.

5. As external stimulation increases, internal motivation decreases.

The average adolescent is disconnected from technology for only one hour a day. This means stimulation is streaming, and dopamine is flowing. Our focus groups indicate that this has caused a decrease in internal motivation. Experiments among students show that external rewards actually reduce internal drive and ambition. Kids work for the reward, not the satisfaction of the work. The external (and possibly artificial and superficial) reduces incentive and, consequently, self-sufficiency.

6. As consequences for failure diminish, so does the value of success.

Kids grow up in a world where mistakes and failure often don't carry consequences. They see a friend commit a crime or cheat on a test and get off easy. They watch people get shot on TV or on a violent video game, but it doesn't mean anything. Further, it is common for adults to swoop in and prevent them from suffering consequences when they fail in school and sports. This desensitizes kids and makes them emotionally uninvolved and unprepared for the real world. If we remove the possibility of failure, ambition to succeed can also evaporate.

7. As virtual connections climb, emotional intelligence declines.

Pew Research [reports](#) that Millennials prefer digital interaction to interpersonal conversations. In fact, they also say the use of phones and other mobile devices are allowing them to cut back on their driving. About 40% say they substitute texting, email and video chats for meeting up with friends in person. This may mean their first impressions on others are weak, featuring little eye contact, poor listening and communication skills, and a lack of emotional intelligence.

8. As free content swells, so does our sense of entitlement.

This one likely affects all of us but has certainly been verified in K-12 and higher education. Not all, but much of what kids experience is free: video content, answers online, and even awards and affirmation from adults. It's the law of supply and demand. When there is great supply, there is a reduction of demand. It's easy for us to feel entitled to resources that cost something in the past. Kids may not want to earn an income or pay their dues when answers have been free so far.

The Need: Intentional Influence

Few people saw these unintended consequences two decades ago. The key is simple to understand but challenging to implement. We must exercise intentionality in developing these necessary soft skills in the emerging generation. We can no longer assume those emotional muscles will develop naturally in kids. We must initiate a plan to build them. We'll likely need to talk this issue over with them, and agree to balance the virtual with the genuine; the screen with the real. In short:

- More time interacting with real people.
- More time outside in active movement.
- More time working and waiting on answers.
- More time initiating and less time reacting.

Let's reverse this *inverse relationship* and launch an incredible generation of kids into their careers.

See more at: <http://growingleaders.com/blog/inverse-relationship-technology-soft-skills/#sthash.Kv3QNzxn.dpuf>

