The Toxicity of Technology

By Sabrina M. Maxwell, PhD

There are many forms of technology being used in today’s world: educational, research, social media, literary, and electronic technology. Many of them produce useful information and provide very valuable foundations for world health, commerce, societal change, and exploratory knowledge. However, electronic technology is becoming a mirage in limited communication channels that may misrepresent the message being sent versus the meaning of the thought, and seems to be taking over our world. I am not suggesting we do away with electronic technology, merely that we take control of it before it takes further control over us. The common denominator of face-to-face communication is quickly becoming a thing of the past. The common languages of cultures and people are being replaced by texting, google e-mail, and patterns of online community. Worldwide industries no longer barter for business in a circle of familiar tones or commodities. The industry leaders are consumed with being the first to create new electronic systems. All of these systems are being replaced by what new generations are calling the age of technology.

Within our offices, in the field of commercial real estate, there are approximately 6 to 8 separate computer programs we must work with on a daily basis: 1) work order systems, 2) online security systems, 3) corporate websites with access to forms, policies, updates, adherence, 3) online purchase order and invoicing, 4) specific department portal access, 5) property website addresses, 6) individual property specific accounting systems, 7) required WebEx compliance courses, 8) and of course all the Outlook, Microsoft Word, Excel, and Power Point programs. The office personnel now spend significant hours of our time in front of a computer, sitting, sitting, and sitting. According to a recent study completed be the Stanford University and Texas A&M “…sedentary jobs have risen 83% since 1960, and today 80% of American workers experience back pain” (Southwest Magazine, July 2016). Although with electronic technology there seems to be a high rate of productivity, what is it doing to our communication skill? Plus we have to consider our health. The same study mentioned above by Stanford University and Texas A&M also found that people who sit all day are 54% more likely to have serious heart problems (July, 2016). Is this the right way to rise up the next generation of rulers, teachers, businessmen, and industries?

Recently I received a call from my 13-year-old granddaughter’s school teacher who was reaching out to connect with her mother (my daughter). The teacher wanted to know why my granddaughter (we’ll call her Carol) had not signed up for next year’s excelled Spanish course; after all it would apply
toward high school credit. Apparently Carol was supposed to have the pre-knowledge to *download an app on her phone to access the class sign up* — REALLY? Carol is 13, in 8th grade! What happened to communication between teachers and parents? Teachers must be CLAD (Cross-Cultural Language and Academic Development, (October, 2015) with the correct certification before they can teach a language. The sad part is that the teacher had to have approval to even ask Carol if she knew about the course and wanted to sign up. Go figure, technology has taken away the rights of teachers who merely want to discuss future coursework with the child, and the parent is supposed to be aware of this? Something clearly is not right in this scenario. According to the US Department of Educational 2014 code, 20 hour modules are provided to the kindergarten through grade 12 weekly, increasing the computer use be 10% from prior years, and the goal is to increase this use (https://code.org/files/Code.orgOverview.pdf).

There are too many assumptions regarding the child’s possession of a computer or phone that downloads an app, the assumption that money is no object in the purchase of technology, and the parent-teacher relationship being categorized and controlled by this system.

I understand the convenience of a parent being able to check in on their child’s classwork by jumping online to confirm homework, but isn’t that also a conversation parents should have at the dinner table the night before? Isn’t it common sense for a parent to be able to discuss the school, the homework, the expectation with both the child and the teacher, rather than having to ‘go online and download an app’? Even the older skills of wood shop, auto shop, metal shop, band, and the arts in general are threatened by today’s economy (or lack of) and the need to implement technology into the high schools.

The so called convenience of technology has gone way too far. How do we real it back in and control it rather than allow it to control us. How many parents these days have their teenagers buried in the cell phone, the texting, the Google search, when they need to have a face-to-face conversation with their child? I recently heard on the radio station 107.9FM that the restaurants in England are installing a cell blocker to get people to socialize face-to-face during the meal (August 2, 2016). The restaurants are finding that the customer seldom looks at the waiter when ordering. The last time you went to diner, did you notice the I-pad on the table that you have to order from? When is it okay for a restaurant to remove the interaction of the waiter or waitress and have you order online? Jeez, you can do that from home, why go out to eat? What used to be a social event is now just an online order.

Bill payment online may be convenient for some, and even handy when one is juggling money during hard times. But, maybe I want to write a check rather than pay a bill online. Technology won’t let me........and don’t forget which user name and password you used for that site. It is all supposed to
be private, confidential, unwritten, but I would gather to guess most people have an Excel sheet to keep track of all the miscellaneous portal entry names that are required to access the sites. Even cars are bought online. Do you even know the exhilaration of test driving multiple cars to decide on the one that best fits your need and personality?

Another area of deep concern is where education is transitioning to all online. The effects of the transition affect the parent, student, and the teacher. Teachers are being bullied if they do not comply with the numbers required to collect online credits. Beginning 2000 the increase in teachers being bullied by both colleagues and parents is on the rise in the UK, Canada, and the US. Information technology is sharing startling statistic in blogs such as www.bullyonline.org and http://endteacherabuse.org regarding the abuse and bullying of teachers. Within a national survey given to teachers by the American Federation of Teachers in conjunction with Badass Teachers Association, this epidemic is taking the lives of teachers who commit suicide from the unfair treatment they experience (2015). Increasing pressures from the US Department of Education evolving educational statues from face-to-face to an online classroom is further chasing away the in class experience. The value as a teacher, then, is determined by who has downloaded an app or received ‘attendance’ credit for a course.

High school is about learning where one fits into society, as well as a review for college coursework. It appears that a student fits best behind a screen, because online high school is becoming the new form of education. Some of these kids do not even meet in person. They may meet in a chat room, with the use of technology, but the face-to-face meetings are becoming a thing of the past. Classes and the school season are being shortened, thus allowing lots of extra time to ‘surf the net’ rather than perform family chores, exercise, or engage in healthy outdoor activity. Several recent studies on child health supports the evidence that the Gen-Y student has increased an average of 15 to 25 pounds from gazing at the cell phone rather than engaging in exercise. The American Journal of Preventive Medicine completed a study in 2011 showing the association of sedentary behavior from screen time and unhealthy dietary behaviors in children. The recommendation “…intervention need to be developed that target reduction in sedentary time to test whether the diet also changes” (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). Again, the important factor is not to remove technology completely, which is not going to happen anyway, but to curb the use and take back control over ourselves, our children, grandchildren, and practice more face-to-face communication.

What has happened to society? We are trying to simplify the communication – the aim of technology – instead we’ve lost the personal communication. The face-to-face method of conversation
is quickly disappearing. Kids no longer know how to write cursive. They barely know how to spell correctly – thanks to texting, phonetic spelling is becoming an ancient art, and clear sentences are shortened into a new Gen-Y dictionary. In 2013, Elite Daily published an article on “Why the Texting Generation is Actually the Lonely Generation”. In this article about texting and technology it was shared that “…this privilege is slowly eliminating the actual physical presence of people in our lives and lessening our ability to properly communicate” (elitedaily.com). See, I am not the only one is concerned about the subject, and this article comes from someone steeped in their technology. I understand that cultures and people have evolved throughout millions of years, and that is just a piece of history. Let’s choose, though, how we want to formulate that new culture and not completely destroy the human interaction.

The skill of communication is not only one person speaking to another, or groups of people talking. Communication involves verbal, non-verbal, eyes, ears, hearing, touching, and intense listening. In 1971, Professor Mehrabian combined the statistical results of the two studies and came up with the following results. Communication is made up of both verbal and non-verbal interaction. The non-verbal component is made up of body language (55 percent), tone of voice (38 percent), and feelings (7 percent (Mehrabian, May 2009, kaaj.com). This startling thought should cause one to wonder, IF communication is non-verbal, the action, the facial expression, the genuine emotion of the message being sent, then how can this possibly be transferred through electronic technology? In technology this non-verbal is lost, or lessened through texting, emails, Skype, Slack, or even Facebook. Don't get me wrong, it is amazing to reach out to someone on the other side of the world, the state, or the nation just to check in and say hello. It is fascinating to see someone via chat that is clear across the nation. But the value of community is not so much in your backyard anymore. Ergo, we are losing 70% of the real message in communication, and not teaching our future generations the value of sitting with previous generations to learn the art of communication, the value of face-to-face conversation, and tradition of our worlds. Broadening the value of community across lands, seas, and sky is an awesome thing, but remember your neighbor. Stop and say hello to the person near you, and share a story of yours and their world that both can relate to.

During a WebEx class, how many people really listen and hear the story? Yes, they may be online, attending, but are they also working while listening. They may be receiving credit for a WebEx course, but do they know what they’ve learned? Learning is a different process for each person. Some people are able to multi-task and learn from a WebEx while focusing on other tasks, but others learn better in a classroom situation. One thing is certain, the classroom situation assures that the individual
is not multi-tasking during coursework, especially if they are required to role-play. The art of brainstorming, or sharing ideas, is better experienced in the classroom situation. Part of the value of learning is in-fact the concept that a classmate might share a story or thought that expands on one individual’s tunnel vision of ideas. How often have you thought to yourself “Gee, I never looked at things that way” when someone makes a new suggestion?

I know of a nurse who lost her job because she was helping a patient rather than signing into a computer. As an operating room nurse she was assisting the surgeon in a hospital process and got in trouble (fired) for not checking into the computer to signify where she is at each moment of her 12-hour shift. Although she was an excellent nurse, her lack of knowledge in technology took her job. You might think – oh there is more to it – but I also know an oncology nurse, a head nurse, who finds herself communicating with computers in tracking progress more than she is able to be a nurse to her patients. Her heart hurts for the pain that cancer victims endure, but the computer skills are required to maintain the patient file and protect the liability of the hospital. What happened to compassion, communication, and the community of care?

We must learn to balance the two, technology and other forms of communication. Technology isn’t going away, and that is not a bad thing, but technology is taking over our definition of the workday and measure of success. We must learn to manage the definition of value in technology and place more value on the human interaction. Even shopping centers have to include an internet WIFI site or they will lose the next generations of shoppers. What are we doing to our world? Balance is gone and working 24 hours a day for 7 days per week because our I-phone goes off with another spam at 11:30 p.m. at night.

How do we get back to hearing the missing 73% of communication, the value of face-to-face clarity of meaning, community of persons, and include all generations? It used to be that kids would learn about life from parents, and grandparents, teachers, and mentors. Now they won’t even look at them; they send a text, which by the way has misspelled words. Yes, it’s great to connect with a friend on the other side of the nation or world through the use of Facebook, but one can’t even date someone in their neighborhood without first checking an online dating site. I am not saying that this is bad, just that it has gone too far. Technology has/is taken too much of our lives. We spend hours with our phones, computer’s, TV’s, and I-pad, but only minutes with the family. We have to stay up on emails or we’ll miss the boss’ message. Priority and perspective have been taken over by the fear of not connecting, and yet we’re not connecting. In reality you need to reach out to the person next to you and learn about them. You may give and receive what all of us really want – a little humanity, the human touch, community, and the emotion that connects us as people generation after generation.
So what are some steps we all can take to leverage toxicity? The symptoms of toxicity are similar: fear and confusion, anxiety and apprehension, confusion or chaos when the username is wrong, anger or hurt because following the website instruction is not working. I am not saying let’s rid ourselves of technology, just don’t let it take over your life. Begin with awareness, being aware of how much technology is used in your life, your home, your family, and how dependent each is on the technology. Measure the time spent with each website, technology tool, or interactive devise. Make a decision, maybe even together as a family, on what is an acceptable amount of time spent on technology. Decipher the MUST from the WANT when working with each devise. Set healthy boundaries and goals for running the electronic tools, rather than allowing them to run you. Sit with your child, spouse, friend, or other family and decide together what it means to lessen an amount of electronic communication. Do research on healthy communication, what it means, what it does not mean, and what it should look like in your world. Most of all, own your technology rather than allowing it to own you. Spend time with face-to-face communication, paying special attention to those non-verbal expressions, body language, eye contact, and confirm the meaning being received matches the meaning being sent.

When my children were very young we used to play a game we called “So what I hear you saying is...”. The rules were simple, but required good listening, courtesy, and politeness. Each person would take a turn to say a sentence as quick as they could to another family member. The listening person then had to complete the sentence above and confirm what they heard was what was meant to be heard. My advice, try it, you might like it!! But most of all, do not allow the toxicity of technology to take over your life, your family, your ability for clear communication, or the need for humanity. Become familiar with the measure of technology your family is experiencing, and make a decision on what constitutes healthy communication in your life, your family, and create the boundaries to how this will work for you and your family.

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