

# Virtual World Communications

By Andrea Brockmeier, PMP

## Industry Brief

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The old couple sat on the porch, moving in synch with their rocking chairs, lamenting about “kids today.” For how many generations has that scene played out? I am not ready to be spending my days in a rocking chair, but I do sometimes find myself wondering about “kids today.” In particular, the seeming dependence on e-communications has me often asking how technology is affecting people in the workplace. Without exception, my students have multiple examples of how cell phones, laptops, PDAs, and other communication devices have distracted, disrupted, or otherwise had a negative impact on a meeting or engagement of some kind at work.

Not that we expect people to stop using these things. Indeed, I am as tied to my cell phone as anyone. After all, these tools allow us to stay connected and work with teams around the nation or the world, a possibility that we could not have benefited from less than a generation ago. But it is curious how many examples I hear of situations in which those distractions are *not* contributing to the communication event, yet no one is willing to request that they be put away. Even in non-work related social situations, we have all seen people sitting at a table in a restaurant talking, texting or checking email on their cell phone rather than interacting with the person sitting across from them. Sometimes it seems that we are more comfortable in a virtual, faceless world than we are with the “real” one in which we’re living.

One doesn’t have to look hard to find plenty of research that has explored cell phone and technology dependence. Anxiety and depression have both been linked to dependence on being connected. One article suggested that cell phones are the “new cigarettes.” Without having to go in to an in-depth analysis of the research, anecdotally we have all either seen or participated in cell phone/pda use that would suggest that these connections aren’t too far fetched.

A student recently shared a story in class that illustrated a firsthand example of a problem with our overly-virtual world. Corporate recruiters at the college his son was attending complained that the students were unable to conduct themselves appropriately in face-to-face communications. During interviews, for example, they wouldn’t look the interviewers in the eyes, they were fidgety, and were inept at professional, non-verbal communications. The students had great technical

skills, but they struggled with personal interaction. In response, the college implemented communications training for the students, and they were able to address the communication issues. The training was well-received and appreciated by the students, and the recruiters were able to see the results in more successful interviews.

The truth is, you and I are the “kids today.” How often do we resort to email when we know a phone call would be more effective, or instant messaging when a short walk to speak directly to someone would probably yield a better result? We sometimes don’t have a lot of options for communications methods, particularly as our professional and project worlds become more geographically dispersed. Regardless of whether our degree of “virtualness” is by choice or by necessity, however, how much thought do we need to give to what we’re losing at the expense of convenience and efficiency? Perhaps it will be up to the real kids today to figure that out after a full generation has grown up in a virtual world.

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