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# THE PERSONAL TOUCH

BY HANNALORE DIETRICH, CCLS

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A couple of recent scenarios helped me decide to research the use of digital technologies: (1) I have seen co-workers who prefer to “speak” to each other by e-mail or instant messaging—verbal communications are almost non-existent. When co-workers use words that appear sharp or critical in e-mail messages, it is expected that those messages are to be easily forgiven or “wiped away” by the sender’s remarks that he/she was mistaken or is sorry for the earlier e-mail.

(2) A friend of mine told me that her daughter spent six months in Cambodia to set up a program for her university. The daughter had little internet or telephone access. When she returned to the university, her friends wanted to “hang out” one evening. When she arrived at the gathering place, all of her friends in the room were glued to their electronic devices. After a few minutes, and with little human-to-human verbal communication, aside from the audible “yes” or “no way” in the room, the girl left.

Legal offices have ramped up their digital technology use, but one thing remains constant—our clients, co-workers, and vendors. We must be diligent to maintain human-to-human contact with them in effective ways—the *personal touch*. The following research addresses primarily youth; however, it can easily be applicable to adults.

In the legal profession, new technologies like West-Law, LegalSolutions, online e-filing, and smart phones and tablets speed up the rate at which we are able to send and receive data. Smart phones, iPads, tablets, office machines, and the internet produce millions of communiqué every minute. Many recipients of today’s communication are human beings, so we need to think about the content shared and its impact on the receiver. Otherwise, meaning can be lost.

In *The Distraction Addiction* (Pang, 2013), studies showed that monkeys’ and humans’ minds are very similar. Monkeys’ minds are constantly active and demonstrate restlessness. With the added sounds of electronics, beeps from new voicemail messages, flashing lights, and buzzing of text messages, monkeys’ minds are in a manic state, unable

to distinguish between choices or technologies. In contrast, Pang noted that Buddhist teachings require a person to use solitude and silence to quiet the mind. Catholics use monasteries for meditation to prepare the mind to receive God’s wisdom, because Catholics believe the busy mind cannot hear the divine (pp. 4-5).

**Alex Pang (2013) continued regarding preferential use of technology:**

For too long, we’ve left the chatting monkey in charge of our technologies, and then we wonder why things go bad . . . We want the same capability to use complicated technologies without thinking about them, without experiencing them as burdens and distractions. We want our technologies to extend our minds and augment our abilities, not break up our minds. (p. 7).

Mark Bauerlein (2008) writes in his book, *The Dumbest Generation*, that the youth of today are absorbed with digital tools and have more knowledge and information readily available. Yet, they are “no more learned or skillful than their predecessors . . . except in the materials of youth culture” (pp. 8-9). Young Americans are talented and enterprising, but are not into ideas, books, and civics. Technology has thrust them into a different realm and other consciousness (p. 10).

In *iDisorder* (2012), Dr. Larry Rosen reported of a 1995 cyberlife study regarding psychological health, which was conducted using 93 households. Dr. Robert Kraut, who

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conducted the research, found that increased internet use did not create positive connectivity (pp. 21-22). Dr. Rosen continued, “greater use of the Internet is associated with increases in loneliness and symptoms of depression” (pp. 75-76). Symptoms of depression or mania can be played out through a person’s relationship with social media and technology (p. 76).

**The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) reported a few symptoms of mania:**

1. Feeling wired or jumpy, agitation, and irritable mood;
2. Talking very fast, racing thoughts, and jumping from idea to idea; and
3. Easily distracted. (Rosen, 2012, p. 77).

Additionally, Dr. Rosen (2012) found that some people experience social withdrawal with increased digital technology usage. One man, who was formerly a social person, became more withdrawn after using computers, the Internet, and video games. This man’s “computer was so enveloping he rarely ate, and after a few years, Alan could no longer tolerate going to the office. People became annoying to him” (p. 171). A few social withdrawal traits are: (1) social anxiety that does not abate, (2) indifferent to criticism or praise of others, and (3) suspicious thinking (p. 171).

John Palfrey and Urs Gasser (2008) in *Born Digital* classify the new digital generation as people who “live much of their lives online, without distinguishing between the online and offline” (p. 4). These digital natives have only one identity that merges their surreal with their personal lives; others are able to separate the two identities. Digital natives have common practices like the time spent using digital technologies, the ability to multitask, how they relate and express themselves by digital technologies, and how they create new art and new knowledge through digital technologies. For digital natives, “new digital technologies—computers, cell phones, Sidekicks—are primary mediators of human-to-human connections” (p. 4).

Digital natives have lots of friends, online and in the real space. Overnight, digital natives’ friends and connections grow. Yet, the nature of their friendships is changing: “They are often fleeting; they are easy to enter into and easy to leave, without so much as a goodbye; and they are perhaps enduring in ways we have yet to understand” (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008, p. 5).

With the diverse amount of information on the internet, the question of quality of information is posed. More is not always better. The digital generation may not question vast amounts of readily available information, as prior generations did. Because of the digital age, both digital natives

and the older generation will view information differently (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008, p. 164).

Palfrey and Gasser (2008) noted their concern for people who digitally skim information, as shown in the following e-mail message written by Urs to John (p. 275):

I worry too, about the gap in access, literacy, and participation. The digital “haves”—those who are both born digital and who have the opportunities and skills to make use of the technologies—need to realize that there are digital “have-nots” in every culture, and it matters. Whether for self-interested reasons or altruistic motives, Digital Natives ought to work to bridge the access, literacy, and participation divides that bedevil societies. If left alone, these digital gaps will cause other unhealthy gaps in society to widen (p. 279).

In the book *Talking Back to Facebook*, James P. Steyer (2012) stated that youth and adults use social networks differently. How the youth use social networks can be unhealthy or even hurtful. They use social networks for social interaction as opposed to human-to-human interaction. Youth even text more, as it is quick and efficient, without regard to the emotional nuances of voice tone and facial expressions. Without critical thinking, “. . . these new forms of electronic communication can also be cruel and damaging, and anonymous online communities can instantly amplify the impact of pain and bullying, gossip, and social exclusion” (p. 5).

Steyer (2012) stated that “more than 5 billion people own cell phones” (p. 7), and youth average 3,339 text messages each month. In addition, youth use their phones to listen to music, take and share photos, and access the internet. This surreal world is shaping their universe, interests, behaviors, and values (p. 7).

According to Steyer (2012), “kids are now spending far more time with the media and technology than they are with their families or in school” (p. 7). Youth and adults should reflect on how the digital world impacts their emotional and social health, their concepts of reality, and their standards (p. 7). In other words, “technology is becoming the architect of a new intimacy” (p. 9).

Walking down the street on any given day, it is common to see people with their eyes glued to their smart phones, tablets, or laptop computers. Steyer (2012) stated that when people are “focused on a device or computer screen for seemingly hours on end, people can ignore meaningful personal connections and emotional cases” (p. 9).



### Child development experts believe the following:

... digital media affects our ability to give full, undistracted attention to each other and our own thoughts. The lack of disconnected downtime in our tech-dominated lives is disrupting our ties to each other and adding significant emotional stress to the lives of millions of kids and adults. (Steyer, 2012, p. 9)

Additional issues that may result from constant digital technology use are: (1) attention/addiction, (2) privacy, and (3) perils and possibilities (Steyer, 2012, pp. 9, 11-15).

One relationship side effect of digital technology is distraction. i-Distracted is its own culture. Steyer (2012) commented that i-Distracted can be rude and ignores basic social courtesies. In addition, i-Distracted can erode the quality of interpersonal relationships with family, friends, and co-workers. The more time a person spends on technology, the less time that person can spend in meaningful human relationships (pp. 21-22).

People know how much we care about them by the attention we give. If we do not pay attention to people, we are sending the opposite message. Stanford Professor Clifford Nass told a story of two undergraduate students. One distressed girl tried communicating her thoughts and feelings to a friend. This friend had her laptop open and was glancing at it frequently. Professor Nass believed this digital distraction reduces a person's ability to show empathy and compassion. If a person is not an attentive listener, he or she may miss subtle emotional nuances, and the responses may be shallower because of not being fully engaged (Steyer, 2012, p. 22).

Further studies show that without facial expressions or tonal voice, it is difficult to fully understand text or digital messages. While texting may be quick and easy, studies

indicate that young people feel greater insecurity and social anxiety in the virtual world, where postings and texting are used as the basis for breakups, jealousy, anger, and confessions (Steyer, 2012, p. 23).

Some experts believe that young people are becoming more impulse-driven and self centered in the "me" world of social media. Elias Aboujaoude, a Stanford Medical School psychologist, stated that online behavior and personality formation are crossing over into the offline lives of youth. Aboujaoude commented: "We are more impatient, more narcissistic, more regressed even when there is no browser in sight" (Steyer, 2012, p. 26).

Digital technology is all around us. It advances our professional and personal lives. The question remains: How much focus will we give to digital technology vs. human relationships? In the legal industry, it is very important to maintain positive human-to-human relationships with clients, co-workers, and vendors, also known as *the personal touch*.

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## DON LEE

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After two years, Don was approached by his mentor Lloyd "Spike" Dethlefsen, CSR #2. That's right, license number 2! Spike persuaded Don to go to Merced and to eventually take over his business, which he did, and he has never regretted that decision. While working in the deposition business, Don was also the official reporter for Mariposa County, the oldest and still working courthouse (built in 1854). He also covered all the justice courts in Merced which numbered approximately six, and he also took depositions from Stockton to Fresno; that's when gas was cheap.

In the 1970s, Don's boss Spike introduced him to the Merced-Mariposa Legal Secretaries Association and its members and attended a couple of evening meetings. The legal secretaries from Mariposa and outlying areas had to travel an

hour to get to the meetings in Merced. As he attended more meetings, he became more involved and was eventually its President back in the 70's, the same year as Patricia Parson.

Don said that he has been really lucky and blessed to continue to meet interesting people, even since my retirement in 2007, because he has continued to volunteer full time at Merced Senior Center from October 2012, to January 2014, and he's heard countless stories of real live adventures of people growing up in America or emigrating here and helping to build this country and state. And the stories he remembers? Only one, the day he was made an Honorary Member of Legal Secretaries, Inc., November 12, 2011.

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