

Text, Email, Repeat

A recent study confirms what we already knew about generational communication. Millennials would rather text than talk on the phone or have face to face communication. For clarification, millennials were born 1978-1995, making them 22-39 years old (I am in this group). This is significant because it means they currently comprise 40-50 percent of the workforce, and that number is expected to grow. Texting and emails have made it much easier to communicate, but what are the implications of this trend, especially in a mixed generational workplace? Healthcare?

Did Mark Zuckerberg ever imagine the culture and change in culture Facebook would create and the lessons learned from the data produced by his social media genius? People are living “the perfect life,” the appearance of having it all together with only words and pictures. Sixty-two percent of those in the study said they would rather leave their wallet at home than their phone. The smartphone is no doubt an extension of our self now.

This dynamic along with what the study indicates puts the healthcare industry at a greater risk. The problem with texts, emails and social media is that the very key aspects of communication are lost. While we gain speed and accessibility, we lose:

- Tone
- Attitude

- Empathy
- Compassion
- Context
- Body language
- Pain
- Eye contact

These aspects are extremely important for communicating in all work environments, but even more so in healthcare for safety and satisfaction reasons. Reimbursements in healthcare are being tied and benchmarked to quality and satisfaction. Without face-to-face interaction, this will suffer. Even the emerging aspect of telemedicine includes a live video feature. Smart phones are even being used to send patient data such as vital signs to the doctor from home.

There are so many policies in the healthcare systems that prohibit the use of smartphones, what happens when the dependent tool is taken away? Where is the focus? Does it increase distraction? Where is the balance? Does the skillset of effective communication still exist? This generation has mastered the art of smartphone multitasking, right?

In visiting several allied healthcare programs on college campuses, the answer to the above question to some degree is “No”. Faculty notes that over

time the current generation has lost important problem-solving skills, deductive reasoning, and time-oriented focus. This is directly related to the technology that has been available. Students seem to be able to pass the tests but struggle more in the application/demonstration lab phases. It was noted that “they consistently look to their peers and instructors for confirmation”. This is again a direct result of the smartphone, as confirmation by text and video text is always immediately available. Texting and smart phones allow decisions, risks and responsibility to be spread out. This is demonstrated by how many new physicians are going into solo practice.

I cannot under-appreciate the amazing automated technological advancements in healthcare and our daily lives, but it does not replace the basics of communication that the healthcare environment demands. The customer support industry has been greatly altered by the non-verbal communication. Reference FAQs and product blogs are now the first line of support in many cases, but there is still proven value of being able to correctly communicate with someone at a critical point or time of need. It is impossible for automation to account for every scenario. People and circumstances are unique; therefore the verbal context is imperative.

The traditionalists and the boomers must recognize this and understand that they cannot just expect the millennials to stop. After all, it is what they know. Parents and faculty have a responsibility to approach the situation differently and “disconnect” their kids/students and get back to the basics.

I spend time working with organizations to focus on teaching staff the importance of the verbal face-to-face and the implications of not addressing it

on culture, patient safety and team dynamics. While it is not necessarily the millennial generations fault, the lost verbal/face-to-face communication function cannot simply be ignored. It also can't just be assumed that the 40-50% of work force will figure it out. There must be a balance.

Feel Free to email me your thoughts (haha) or just give me a call 318-537-1509