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Review: The Village Effect by Susan Pinker

By Stefan Stern

The benefits of the digital age have been oversold. Or to put it another way: there is plenty of life left in face-to-face, human interaction. That is the message emerging from this entertaining book by Susan Pinker, a Canadian psychologist.

Citing a wealth of research and reinforced with her own arguments, Pinker suggests we should make an effort – at work and in our private lives – to promote greater levels of personal intimacy.

"In a short evolutionary time we have changed from group-living primates skilled at reading each other's every gesture and intention, to a solitary species, each one of us preoccupied with our own screen," she writes.

In becoming more physically solitary we risk doing ourselves harm. Pinker provides evidence in support of her claims. People with active social lives recover faster after an illness than those who are more isolated, she reports.

A 2006 University of California study of 3,000 women with breast cancer found that those with a large network of friends were four times as likely to survive as women with fewer social connections. Widows and widowers live longer if their neighbourhoods are home to other widows and widowers.

Pinker says creating our own "villages" of friends and colleagues is good for our health and working life. But these should be real-life connections, not merely virtual ones.

The internet presents a paradox: "Some say we're more connected now than ever – mostly due to the internet – and some say we're less connected – mostly due to the internet. Both views are correct."

She travels to a Sardinian village where many live well into their nineties. The secret? As well as diet and exercise, there is a culture of "reciprocal altruism" in which few of the villagers are ever neglected.

We should learn from this, Pinker says. Take family meal times. The more meals you eat with your child, the larger the child's vocabulary and the higher his or her school grades, thanks to the conversation. "Consuming organic broccoli is not what makes kids smarter."

If you think Pinker is writing just about home life, rather than the workplace, consider how the effects noted by Pinker must apply to meeting face to face with colleagues or contacts.

When it comes to customers, Zappos, the online retailer, has shown the value of preserving human contact. Call Zappos and you get through to a human being who will deal with your inquiry, setting no time limit to the conversation.

As more customers use digital to interact with Zappos, the company is still trying to maintain the involvement of real human beings.

In a recent campaign on Instagram, it asked users to post pictures of themselves with the hashtag #nextootd ("next outfit of the day"). Rather than an algorithm, it was a Zappos employee that went through each shot, commenting and suggesting Zappos attire the person pictured might like.

In offices everywhere proximity matters. Ideas flow better when people can see each other and talk easily.

"Online networks are social la-la lands," Pinker writes. "They're where people post idealised digital personae they've crafted for public consumption."

The people we call "friends" online may be no such thing. And do not place too much faith in the kit. "Face-to-face contact with a skilled teacher for even one year in a child's life has more impact than any laptop programme has had so far."

Reciprocal altruism is a winning strategy in life and in business. Pinker reminds us of a great insight from former baseball player and manager Yogi Berra: "Always go to other people's funerals. Otherwise they won't come to yours."

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