



PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS: WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS

Face time is crucial to morale and productivity

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May 21, 2009

Dear Susan,

I work in insurance and my company moved eight months ago to newly renovated offices, which are very nice. But combined with recent layoffs, the move has made me feel more isolated and paranoid about my work than I was before. In our other building, I used to see colleagues in the reception area, halls or stairwell, and we'd catch up as we passed each other. Now we're in an office tower and spread out on different floors, so we don't see each other unless there's a meeting. Most of us even use different elevators, conference rooms and bathrooms. What can I do to feel less out of the loop?

- *Lonely Planet*

Dear Lonely,

You'll have to overcome management's design blunders by changing your habits. Take the long way around, use different elevator banks, bathrooms and coffee machines, and seek out colleagues where they sit to get around the fact that the transition team didn't create areas where people naturally converge.

This meandering will not only boost your morale but your efficiency. All recent evidence points to spontaneous meetings as the germs of creativity - a formula that any good sales team knows well. When salespeople fly thousands of miles to meet and greet clients, they know that a handshake transmits much more than swine flu. It's all about building trust through brief, even chance encounters.

Barry Wellman, a sociologist at University of Toronto and the director of NetLab, a research group devoted to computer networks, is one of the world's experts on connecting through technology. In the early nineties, he and his colleagues used webcams and other forms of electronic media to exchange ideas and keep tabs on each other.

But these days he prefers rubber soles to fibre optics, he told me when I met him over breakfast last month. When he wants to chat with U of T colleagues, Prof. Wellman walks down the halls, wryly calling this type of communication "sneaker net."

His immediate impression of your employer? "I think they're in trouble. You want to have places people go to casually. And this is the tip of the iceberg for remote workers, because informal interaction drives a firm's tacit knowledge."

In fact, the free-wheeling give-and-take of our conversation, and our subsequent e-mail contact, reflect one of his research findings: Face-to-face communication is the catalyst for most electronic communication.

In 2004, Prof. Wellman and Anabel Quan-Haase, now a sociology professor at University of Western Ontario, published a study that showed how people who work right near each other communicate more often with each other than they do with people whose offices are on different floors.

That shouldn't be surprising, but here's the kicker: They communicate more using the electronic gadgets that are supposed to cancel out the effects of physical distance.

Being close by meant that they called, e-mailed and texted each other more often than they did with more far-flung colleagues - whether these colleagues were one floor up or in Hong Kong. It turns out that proximity matters.

Keeping "sneaker net" in mind, one guideline to decreasing your isolation is to alter your patterns of movement within the building. Make that more likely to happen by changing your destination. Walking toward a coffee machine located at the end of a long corridor prompts people who don't usually work together to bump into each other on their way to a cup of joe and then congregate in front of the machine, creating what University of Waterloo research psychologist Colin Ellard calls a "thirdspace" - a water-cooler-like area where information is exchanged.

In his engaging new book, *You Are Here: Why We Can Find Our Way to the Moon But Get Lost in the Mall*, Prof. Ellard shows how basic features of our environment - from where we place our desks and coffee makers to the vantage point from a favourite armchair - reflect our mental architecture: the maps in our heads that allow us to move toward what is important to us, while keeping tabs on possible threats.

Prof. Ellard also cited research showing that people whose offices are separated by more than 30 metres almost never meet spontaneously. But bumping into someone by accident, "that's where creativity is sparked," he told me.

Of course, it all depends on what you're after. In professional offices, fostering collegiality lines up nicely with other corporate goals, but that's not always true in other kinds of workplaces.

When I took a visitor to the Montreal Casino, I discovered a warren of slot machines and gaming tables so tightly packed that it was all but impossible not to cross paths with other players.

No one really wants to bump into their supervisor or bank manager in that environment, but bump we did, into my son's third-grade teacher. When I encountered her by the blackjack tables, she deftly averted her eyes.

The space was expertly designed to part people with their cash, but the architect forgot to consider another human factor: the desire to be in your own bubble when an activity is taboo. In my view, we'd have been better off in your new office space, designed as it is for lone actors in isolated lairs.

It is incumbent on you to get around this secret society with the help of "sneaker net." Don't wait for next spring: do it now.

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