



## *Friends-of-the-Firm Mini-Briefing*

# Digital Devices are NOT the Only Way to Communicate!

By

Alan Dunn, President, GDI Consulting & Training Company, 2018



Have you noticed that more people are "visually glued" to their computers, tablets, and smart phones more than ever? Perhaps you have also noticed that many manufacturing and distribution company' personnel would rather spend their day dealing with a digital device than dealing personally with others in their company. This strange phenomenon of actively and aggressively using digital devices in daily job activities might have some negative side effects which we are all missing.

During a recent consulting assignment in a sizable manufacturing company, I noticed dozens of planners, schedulers and buyers who spent their entire day hunched over their digital devices, performing a variety of applications. Certainly, these were important and complex activities that their company depends upon them to perform each day. But I also noticed that these same individuals rarely left their work areas to discuss business activities with other employees. Further, I noticed that NOT ONE of these planners, buyers and schedulers ever visited the very factories they were planning and buying from. Virtually all their communications with others in the organization were accomplished via email or some other form of data transfer. I began to wonder if such an absence of direct human interaction is responsible for my client's chronically poor execution of well-constructed and well-presented plans.

Though the use of information/communication technologies represents an exciting advancement in management tools, including the new AI tools, there may be some potential and serious dangers. After watching my client's personnel interacting for several days with virtually no direct personal interactions, and almost entirely with digital devices, five questions came to mind:

1. If a person replaces human communication with digital communications, will the individual lose human management skills, and more important, leadership skills?
2. Though email and text provides rapid communication capabilities, can it effectively provide the vehicle for all forms of communications, i.e. written, oral, non-verbal, etc.?
3. Can email and text replace the subtleties and nuances of direct communication that often carry the *real meaning* of the discussion?



4. Is it possible that the digital device is becoming less of a tool and more of a non-personal object in which to hide so one doesn't have to deal with tough issues or perhaps co-workers altogether?
5. Is digital communication turning our young managers and future leaders into conflict-adverse managers?

My observations suggest that digital communication within an integrated information environment is exciting and informative. I have observed that the better and more practical the information system is, the more people will use it. The more people use their systems, the less they communicate directly with their co-workers. The less they deal with their co-workers, the more pronounced serious interpersonal problems become. And finally, the more serious problems exist in a non-personal communications world, the more people avoid these very same problems by burying themselves in their digital pseudo world. Leadership clearly suffers even with a plethora of communication!

There is a very serious danger in teaching people to interact with others primarily through an electronic device. I say this not because individuals will necessarily lose their interpersonal skills. Ongoing training can help to ameliorate this. I voice this concern because burying oneself in a digital application while never coming up for air provides an easy vehicle for ignoring the need to make tough decisions and discuss critical issues with co-workers. The well-run interactive information systems environment might just be teaching our people to avoid decision-making, especially around important issues.

Here are five ideas for addressing this problem.

1. Develop and present a BRIEF training program to ALL new employees who use email and text in their day-to-day activities. The focus of this program should be to educate users about the danger of digital-only communications. It should also establish some principles and protocols for communications, including but perhaps not limited to:
  - a. If you can easily walk to the person's work area, meet with them personally. Use your email to memorialize the meeting and its conclusions. Don't make the email system the mechanism of discussion.
  - b. All complex issues that have several constituents should be addressed in collaborative meetings, not sequential emails.
  - c. Face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, web meetings and conference calls should always be considered preferential mechanisms to address complex issues.
2. Educate people to remove themselves from their desks EVERY day and go see what they are actually directing, planning, scheduling, controlling and organizing. Remind them that it is OK to walk around a bit each day. They will surely learn something that their data could not reveal.
3. Find those in the organization who are recognized as good leaders and engage them to educate the younger high-potential employees in ways to build internal relationships.
4. Educate your people in the mechanisms of constructive conflict. Teach them that it is difficult to electronically vet all issues within a conflict. Conflict is fundamentally a human issue. Teach them that conflict can only be prosecuted in a constructive manner... that is, in person.
5. Use ongoing training sessions to stress that personal relationships are the *glue-of-trust* in an organization, not CC'd emails or BTW texts! Drive this home every chance you get.

For the executive who worries about succession planning, it would be good to remember that those born after 1990 have NEVER known a world without the internet. They text, tweet, DM, and email one another more frequently than the Baby Boomer leaders EVER called or met with one another. Don't let this high frequency of communication without personal relationships trick you into believing that the new generation of business leaders' communication methods are better... they are not. It is just more frequent... and "*frequency*" has never been the benchmark for successful communication. "*Outcome*" (results) from communications is, and always will be the true north for successful communications.

## About the Author



Alan G. Dunn is currently President of GDI Consulting & Training Company and founder of the Manufacturing Executive Institute (MEI). He is also the creator and lead-instructor of the 18-month Next Generation Global Supply Chain Leadership Development Program at the California Institute of Technology's (Caltech) Center for Technology & Management Education (CTME), where he has taught since 1984. Mr. Dunn also serves on the University of California at Riverside's (UCR) Advisory Board for Transformative Leadership in Disruptive Times.

Mr. Dunn specializes in supply chain management, strategic planning, manufacturing management, operations management, leadership development, cost management and business finance.

Previously, Mr. Dunn was a Vice President at Gemini Management Consulting and a Partner at Coopers & Lybrand. In both positions, he led large technical manufacturing teams through innovative productivity enhancement projects. Mr. Dunn has participated in >188 significant manufacturing and distribution projects inside >118 companies. He has worked in 24 countries and across most manufacturing sectors.

Over his 40-year career in global supply chain consulting, Mr. Dunn has served on the Boards of Directors of numerous public, private and non-profit companies. He is the recipient of the National Association of Corporate Directors (NACD) prestigious "*Director of the Year*" award in 2007.

Alan is a career Association of Supply Chain Management (ASCM) volunteer, having served as the President of the Orange County Chapter in 1984 and Chairman of ASCM in 2015. He was inducted into the "*ASCM New England Supply Chain Conference Hall of Fame*" in 2022.

Mr. Dunn has a degree in business management from California State University, Fullerton.

## Contact Information

**Alan Dunn, President**  
**GDI Consulting & Training Company**  
P.O. Box 205  
Temecula, California 92593 USA  
951-587-2003  
[agdunn@gdiconsult.com](mailto:agdunn@gdiconsult.com)  
[www.gdiconsult.com](http://www.gdiconsult.com)