The Perils of Connectivity

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The salad spilled onto the desk and headed for the keyboard. As I jumped up to avoid getting hit, I pulled the headphones I was wearing out of my ears and onto the floor. It was then that one of the realities that had become an integral part of my life came clearly into focus. The mess that was occurring was due to the fact that I was participating in a conference call while processing manuscripts on my computer and simultaneously eating my lunch. As part of an obsession to get the maximal productivity out of every moment, I had become a habitual multitasker; in fact, a multi-multitasker.

I was somewhat chagrined to see how this behavior had become so ingrained into my life. It had become so routine I barely thought about it. Moreover, it was obvious that this behavior was part of a deep trend in society, perhaps expressed just a bit more in medicine. Whether in conference rooms, restaurants, or airports, we seem to have become slaves to the goal of productivity and of making every second count. There is just no room for “down time.” This is best exemplified by the plethora of devices and technology that have been developed enabling us to continuously function despite time, place, or accompanying persons.

The quintessential example of our worship of productivity is the cell phone. We have now made it possible to be directly connected 24/7 wherever we are. However, it is not just the capacity to be contacted that has revolutionized life; pagers have long provided that. We now have the ability to instantaneously initiate communication for any purpose. Although the irritation of being exposed to a high-volume conversation in a public place is well known to everyone, it is as an outlet for our compulsion to always be productive. When the telephone rings, it is much slower, and telephone calls often result in a failure to connect. In addition, telephone communication does not allow attachments. E-mail offers the ability to access e-mails much more ubiquitous. I have even seen people check their e-mail in their car at stop lights. I sometimes wonder if the time lost accessing e-mail, deleting spam, and responding to non–time-sensitive communications offsets the benefits. It certainly can contribute to the sense of a more hectic life.

No one would deny that the Internet is one of the greatest innovations of our time and will continue to revolutionize society and the transmission of information. The fact that so many activities can be accomplished online has improved productivity enormously. The Journal of the American College of Cardiology stands as a perfect example, in that our online manuscript submission and review system has accelerated the peer-review process significantly. In the process of expediting activities, the Internet has also provided an additional opportunity to perform work outside of the usual locations and times. Given a laptop computer and the appropriate telephone card, one can access the Internet 24/7 in most places in the U.S. It seems, can be both a blessing and a curse. We have entered a period where we can work almost anywhere and feed our compulsion to be constantly productive. I remember showing off my new laptop and phone card to my daughter and telling her I could be online and working “even at the La Jolla Shores...”
Beach.” She looked at me incredulously and asked “Dad, why would you want to work at the beach?” Nevertheless, I find myself with my laptop often processing manuscripts online or doing other work whenever and wherever I have a spare minute. That I am not alone in this is obvious by the scores of people busily viewing open computers in airports, limos, restaurants, waiting rooms, and virtually any other area. The extrapolation of this behavior to absurdity is the illustration I recall seeing of a type of eyeglasses that also served as computer monitors so that you could be connected online 100% of the time. As is so often the case, we seem to be taking something so very good and transforming it into something detrimental by taking it to excess.

I remember a time years ago when I could gauge my travel by the number of books I had read on the New York Times bestseller list, since travel was my time for reading. I recall trips to foreign countries where my spare time was spent sightseeing or visiting and not online. In retrospect, it was bliss that there was no e-mail to make me aware of problems at home, which I could not do anything about until returning anyway. I yearn for the opportunity to catch up on what is happening to friends during a telephone conversation that is now often replaced by an e-mail, or exchanging news during the breaks at meetings. Oh for the days when multitasking involved two activities and not more. But, like most of us, I am driven to be productive. I have my multi-gigabyte memory laptop so that I can carry my office with me. I have my broadband phone card so I can access the Internet anytime and any place other than an airplane in flight (at least for the time being). My Treo smartphone not only makes instant communication possible, but also enables me to check e-mails or access the Internet between procedures or patients or even between innings at a baseball game. I am not sure that this infinite connectivity makes me or any of us more productive, and I suspect it may sap some of our energy, concentration, and innovation.

Although we have acquired a great deal of technology to make life easier and more satisfying, I am inclined to believe that in many ways it has had the opposite effect. For me, at least, the time has come to put the quest for even greater productivity into perspective. I cannot help but believe that a little down time for contemplation and relaxation will ultimately produce a better result in whatever I undertake. For sure, it will be more enjoyable.

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