



Doesn't Anybody Talk Anymore?

The death of conversation in a social world

by

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In his film “Her”, Director Spike Jonze tells the story of a man (Joaquin Phoenix) who falls in love with his phone—or at least the voice on his phone a voice effectively narrated by Uma Thurman. While filmed in a contemporary setting, the plot requires no small leap of faith to believe that someone could fall in love with a disembodied piece of technology. “I think technology is doing so many things to us” Jonze said [in an interview with the Los Angeles Daily News](#).

I couldn't agree more.

As an experienced professional in executive recruiting and sales training, I see profound differences in how we communicate with each other and the impact those differences have on establishing and maintaining long-term professional relationships.

The trend is not positive.

In an August 16, 2012 *Time Magazine* article entitled “[We Never Talk Anymore](#)” Jeffrey Kluger details some interesting communications data.

“The telephone call is a dying institution. The number of text messages sent monthly in the U.S. exploded from 14 billion in 2000 to 188 billion in 2010, according to a Pew Institute survey, and the trend shows no signs of abating. Not all of that growth has come out of the hide of old-fashioned phoning, but it is clearly taking a bite — particularly among the young.”

Americans ages 18-29 send and receive an average of nearly 88 text messages per day, compared to 17 phone calls. The numbers change as we get older, with the overall frequency of all communication declining, but even in the 65 and over group, daily texting still edges calling 4.7 to 3.8. In the TIME mobility poll, 32% of all respondents said they'd rather communicate by text than phone, even with people they know very well. This is truer still in the workplace, where communication is between colleagues who are often not friends at all. ‘No more trying to find time to call and chit-chat,’ is how one poll respondent described the business appeal of texting over talking.”



Relationship Problems

This speedy movement away from actual conversation presents problems. Social media is rapidly replacing conversation as the communication standard. Who has time for a call when a text, a tweet, or an email will suffice? We've become touchscreen-centric and we're losing the power of establishing and maintaining real relationships.

In my current sales and recruiter training sessions, I get asked a lot about how to craft the best email for getting your foot in the door. Like adolescent fears of the dreaded "first date" phone call, few relish the cold call. Having your email detoured to the spam folder or simply go unanswered is, for some, better than having a potential client abruptly cut off your phone call pitch. No one likes rejection and if you are rejected, many prefer the anonymity of email.

But we're reaching a tipping point with conversation and it may diminish our professional effectiveness. In my recruitment work, I used to present the three to five most qualified candidates to my clients in a phone call or face-to-face meeting. The result? After meaningful conversations about each candidate, more than three-quarters of those I recommended obtained interviews. Now, the majority of my clients prefer that I send them an email detailing the recommended candidates for their review with little or no further discussion. The nuances that we could cover in a call or a meeting are gone. The results now? Less than half of the candidates I recommend obtain interviews.

Either my work is slipping or there is something important missing from the conversation. Perhaps it's the conversation.

Social media isn't evil. I use it in my personal and professional lives. I enjoy catching up with old friends and connecting to new professional peers. But it's not real life. It's how people want real life to look, through loving photos of family vacations, tear-filled tributes to those less fortunate, and tips on excelling at Cross-Fit, parenting, or organic cooking.

It has grown exponentially in executive recruiting for good reason. I use it as much as anyone. But I don't use it to supplant conversation. Far from mutually exclusive, conversation and social media nicely complement each other. We can be social *and* sustain relationships using old-fashioned conversation and latest-trend technologies. That's the message I try and teach the participants in my training classes and that's the message of this White Paper.

How do you use conversation to your benefit? As with all things; by working at it. It's challenging but it bears fruit. In business, that fruit is relationships and relationships remain the cornerstone of effective business development. Those relationships are undoubtedly augmented by social media. But forging real relationships means going far beyond a text, a tweet, or an email. They require interpersonal communication. To consistently succeed, we have to be far more to our clients and candidates than matchmakers with resumes. Our job is to cultivate relationships and truly understand what clients and candidates seek.

To get to that understanding, have a conversation with them.



Don't Just Text: Talk

When I finally reached adulthood and started making some real money, my dad (with tongue firmly planted in cheek) said to me one day, "I think that you're doing something illegal. All you do all day is talk on the phone and people send you money." He was right. I spent (and continue to spend) large chunks of time actually talking to my clients and candidates and I'm able to make a nice living doing it. Interpersonal communication works for me and it can work for you as well.

If I have to document my communication with a client or candidate for any reason, I use email. But if documentation isn't imperative, I call. I call not merely for the sake of calling. I call to provide my clients with meaningful and necessary information; information far better communicated in a conversation.

All of my client relationships begin with a phone call and at the end of that call, I make an important request, "I need your cell phone number." Not your business phone, your cell phone. I need access and that access is often after 5:00. Their cell phone number becomes our professional bridge. I then outline when I'm most likely to call:

- When I receive questions from candidates that require company knowledge that I don't possess.
- When I want to benchmark specific candidates to see if we're on track.
- When it's time to discuss the finalists.
- This type of communication requires more than a text. It requires a conversation.

Deeper Relationships

Conversation is much more than a sales pitch. It should be deeper and more meaningful. Salesy phone calls or conversations rarely succeed. But meaningful conversations can be memorable. In a 1997 article in The Systems Thinkers newsletter, Juanita Brown and David Isaacs discuss ways to enhance conversation within organizations. Their research and insight remain useful 20 years later. They asked a large sample of business executives what [the keys were to successful business conversations](#). Their results reflect common sense logic and traits that I find lacking in today's business world. They include: There was a sense of mutual respect between us.

- We took the time to really talk together and reflect about what we each thought was important.
- We listened to each other, even if there were differences.
- I was accepted and not judged by the others in the conversation.
- The conversation helped strengthen our relationship.
- We explored questions that mattered.
- We developed shared meaning that wasn't there when we began.
- I learned something new or important.
- It strengthened our mutual commitment

With my clients, strengthening our relationship means providing them with important information—often an external perspective—that helps them recruit and retain the best talent available. I use phone calls and in-person meetings to communicate valuable market research information that I glean from candidates about my clients' companies and their competitors.

My professional conversations allow me to form stronger relationships with my clients, provide context and nuance that's missing in an email or text, and generate real-time feedback on which candidates are the best fit for the needs of their organization.

You don't get such granularity in social media. They require far too much connection, subtlety, voice tone, and sincerity, traits that are very difficult to convey in 140 characters or less. But they are exceedingly valuable and should be attributes that we all strive to bring to our business relationships.

Ease Your Fears

Consciously cultivating conversation is not easy. Relationships of any kind require work. But the results are more than worth the effort.

In the refrain to an indie rock song entitled "I Don't Know How to Talk Anymore" the singer's anguish is apparent:

"I'm afraid of conversation
I'll text you and try to explain
I'm afraid to know you
I'm afraid you might want to know me too!"

At some level, we're all afraid. But it's important to occasionally step beyond social media to the nuanced benefits of old-fashioned conversation. Don't fall in love with your phone. Fall in love with what you garner by using it.

I'd like to hear about your approach to blending conversation with social media. Let's talk. Send me your thoughts at <http://po.st/Ylhmnk>.

[About Amy Healey](#)

A veteran executive recruiter and renowned training expert, Healey engages her demonstrated industry knowledge to help Lucas Group recruit, hire, train, and retain teams of highly capable, motivated, and successful recruiting associates. She leads the internal recruiting team with firsthand insight and verified proficiency and employs an honest, thought-provoking approach. With a powerful combination of street smarts and sincere integrity, Amy believes that success is neither an exact science nor a pure art. Rather it's a process of driving—one that requires focus and active engagement, and she continues to drive success both in and out of the office.

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