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SMART DEVICES *ARE MAKING* DUMB PEOPLE

By Leanne Hoagland-Smith, M.S.

Take a moment to just glance around and observe all the people talking, texting, or being engaged elsewhere on their smart devices. Then listen to these same people communicating one on one with each other. Did you notice some obvious gaps?

One noticeable gap is attention span. Microsoft conducted some research and concluded that, thanks to the mobile revolution, human beings now possess a shorter attention span (8 seconds) than goldfish (9 seconds).

Even with these short attention spans, people are paying far more attention to their smart mobile devices. Research by Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers found the average mobile user checks his or her phone nearly 23 times a day for messaging, 22 times for voice calls, and 18 times for the time.

Yes, the world is changing, and it appears all those smart devices are making for a lot of dumb people who lack what has been called soft skills such as communication, teamwork, work ethics, and adaptability. This is not my opinion but fact founded by research and reported on by LinkedIn, the *Wall Street Journal*, and other respected research organizations.

If you disagree, ask a fellow team member to put his or her smart phone away. You probably have been met with resistance, which demonstrates the inability to be adaptable and questions the person's ability to work as a collaborative team member.

Soft skills have always been a hard cost to the bottom line. Unfortunately, for many years, these skills were presumed to be attained indirectly



through education, parenting, social interactions, or osmosis. Well, not really osmosis, but for some, it seemed like osmosis.

Employers have always been willing to train employees for technical skills whether they run a retail, restaurant, or software coding business. The soft skills were considered present and part of the person's overall package.

However, finding employees today, regardless of age, with those critical soft skills is becoming more and more difficult as shared in a *Wall Street Journal* article by Kate Davidson in August of 2016. Ms. Davidson interviewed several small business owners. All those interviewed shared their own experiences about the incredible difficulty in finding people with soft skills and the impact of soft skills on their businesses, their bottom lines.

So what are those soft skills? The Center for Career Opportunities at Purdue University provides the

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following definition: *the cluster of personality traits, social graces, facility with language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that mark each of us to varying degrees.*

Additionally, Purdue's list of soft skills includes work ethic, courtesy, teamwork, self-discipline, self-confidence, conformity to prevailing norms, and language proficiency. Purdue also makes mention that soft skills are those skills that add more value to the hard skills being demonstrated by the individual.

Business leaders shared in a McKinsey 2013 research study that soft skills are far more crucial than hard or technical skills. This report also revealed that only 25 percent of the students from engineering colleges are directly employable. The lack of soft skills can be a contributing factor to high unemployment by college graduates.

Another report from Development Economics in the United Kingdom actually monetized the impact of soft skills to the UK's economy. This research suggested, in 2015, the monetary impact to the UK's economy was £88 billion (\$107 billion) in gross value or about 6.5 percent of the UK's economy as a whole. The report projected that by 2020, the annual contribution of soft skills to the economy would be £109 billion (\$133 billion) to over £127 billion (\$155 billion) by 2025.

This shortage of soft skills is requiring employers to be more judicious in the recruiting, screening, hiring, and onboarding of their employees. Even with the increase in the use of psychometric assessments such as the DISC Index or Attribute Index, one on one interviewing has become even more essential.

Now job interviewers must discover soft skills an employee possesses during the interview process. To ensure the correct soft skills are present, interview questions are now

separated by category such as communication, decision-making, integrity, leadership, persuasiveness, problem solving, and teamwork.

For example, to uncover the applicant's leadership, problem solving and teamwork soft skills, the question might be as simple as, "Tell me how you solved someone else's problem." Many questions can reveal more than one soft skill.

Another question to learn about the person's communication, integrity, and leadership could be, "Have you ever had to deal with another coworker who wasn't pulling his or her weight? What did you do about it?"

Some organizations have engaged in group interviews. The potential candidate faces questions by other team members. These types of group interviews can be scheduled one on one or may have several candidates all present at the group interview.

Then, upon completion of the interview, the team reassembles to discuss the responses by the applicant or applicants. In many instances, there is already a predetermined rubric in place to support consistency in the scoring.

The lack of soft skills has many in executive leadership roles even now being more intentional in keeping existing high-performing employees. They have come to realize the high cost of turnover and the shortage of good employees with the necessary soft skills.

Small to medium business owners, CEOs, and sales managers may be realizing the impact of people who lack soft skills. In a recent LinkedIn article by David Brock, this was the headline: "Would You Trash a Multi-Million

Dollar Investment after 18-22 Months?”

The cost of hiring people without soft skills is expensive and becomes even more expensive when the employees are not a good fit or when the organization fails to develop them.

Many soft skills can be enveloped within leadership development. Employment research continues to suggest the up and coming workforce of millennials is hungry for leadership development. This same research also reveals the failure to provide leadership development is one of the primary reasons for millennials leaving a given job.

Possibly, 2017 is the time to reverse this trend. Leadership can take one immediate action: ban looking at mobile devices during working hours. Of course, with many in sales and business using their mobile devices for business, this can become a case-by-case basis. Another action would be to write policies specific to the use of smart devices such as mobile phones,

tablets, etc. Then executive leadership must enforce these policies.

Assessing for those soft skills may also be a very viable solution. One of the best psychometric assessments to identify those soft skills is the Attribute Index as published by Innermetrix. This specific assessment identifies 78 key talents and ranks them for the individual. These talents are in alignment with what Purdue University identified as soft skills along with numerous others such as “using common sense” or “respecting policies.”

Maybe the best way to stop the “dumbness” invading the business world is to lead by example. As the leader, do you have your nose in your smart phone? Are you always checking your phone for emails or texts? Is your attention on your phone when it should be on the other person?

As the leader, you can encourage your employees to have meaningful conversations that go beyond a

smiling or thumbs up emoji. Also, you can schedule meetings where smart devices are put in a basket by the door upon entering. Since human brains are not designed to multi-task, by this action you have probably improved the overall quality of the communication within the meeting.

Remember, people buy from people they know and trust. Buying is not always about making a financial transaction but, rather, making a “buy-in” toward the other person. Yes, you as a leader can begin to turn the tide away from all the dumb people with their smart devices. The question is, *Do you have the soft skill of courage to take those necessary actions?* **N**

Leanne Hoagland-Smith is THE People and Process Problem Solver. As a thought leader who challenges the status quo, she earned the position of judge for the 1st 2015 North American Women in Sales Awards. Follow her on Twitter @CoachLee.