

SECRETS
FOR RETAINING
GREAT TALENT

CONNECTIONS CHANGE EVERYTHING

*How Smart Leaders **Connect**
Through Better Conversations*



Kimberly Layne

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Chapter 3

The Power Of Digital Technology

“A new survey out says 64 percent of Americans own a smartphone. Which is interesting because in a related survey, 100 percent of smartphones say they own an American.”

—Jimmy Fallon

Do you know anyone who does not have a smartphone, above the age of ten and below the age of ninety? The adoption of digital technology continues to accelerate.

According to Statista statistics, smartphone subscription as a percentage of the US population went from 20.2 percent in 2010 to over 70 percent in 2018 with smartphone sales to reach over \$80 billion in 2019 (Baron 2016).

Smartphones have connected individuals who might have in the past been isolated. They have allowed for connection

of all of us to each other, with the simple dial of a number, instantly. It has allowed for the ability to see (Apple FaceTime or video applications like Zoom) or talk with loved ones, clients, or colleagues, no matter what time zone, country, or continent. One can argue that it has increased connectivity. The world is a smaller place and technology can connect us when we are distances apart. We can reach anyone anytime, and almost anywhere.

I can remember the first bag phone in my car. It was a clumpy thing that looked like a small vacuum cleaner that took up the entire center console of my car. Or dialing a pay phone in the lobby of one of my top targeted hospitals as a medical device representative in order to page a surgeon to convince them to meet with me to sell my peripheral vascular wires, stents, and balloons. It was not a role of quarters that I was carrying, but a credit card size AT&T Corporate Calling Card where you had to dial a minimum of twenty-five numbers: first the 1-800 access number, then your PIN, then the ten digit number in order to make a phone call. It took five minutes just to initially get connected.

Or how about the non-wireless house phones, which would only let you travel twelve feet or the length of the cord during your conversation, and certainly not outside? You had a house phone practically in every room. Now we have the ability to talk while we walk, and while we drive, indoors or outdoors. We can “reach out and touch someone,” pretty much anywhere and at any time, provided we have cell coverage. Additionally, we don’t necessarily even need to dial and to speak. Smartphones and the internet have allowed us

to ping a colleague, client, or friend across the hall or across the nation, instantly with an email or a text. It's practically magic compared to thirty years ago.

The average age when a child receives a cell phone is ten. Any earlier than that and experts believe a child's brain does not naturally, and with effort, seek out its own dopamine fix, and instead will resort to the easiest fix, which is an iPad or phone screen. Additionally, because of that feel-good feeling that comes with interacting with technology, it can disconnect our kids from their basic needs of sleep, nutrition, fresh air, and physical activity. My bigger concern is that this technology will also disconnect them from their higher human and developmental need of having a sense of belonging, feeling connected, and finding some meaning and value to their life. Instead of sharing and communicating at the dinner table, playing hopscotch or skateboarding outside, or choosing a team sport to play in, our kids may be looking at an iPad or smartphone. Unfortunately, as we get older, we are still gravitating toward the screen for an easy, quick, feel good, dopamine rush of a text, Instagram feed, Facebook feed, or work email.

How many of you remember summer block parties? When the end of your street was blocked off, and all your neighbors showed up with homemade potato salad, baked beans, brownies, and grills fired up with the smell of hot dogs and hamburgers. Music would loudly boom from someone's big boombox, while all the neighborhood kids would be running around playing a game of tag. Adults socialized while drinking their favorite adult beverage and laughing

and joking as they reconnected over shared stories. I can't remember the last time I was at a block party. Can you? I imagine today, and I laugh at the thought, that block parties of today are more like a block webinar. Whereby each of us is sitting in our own chair, at the table, in our own house, with face to a laptop or iPad screen, and earphones plugged in to our favorite station. We attempt to interact with our neighbors through some video application, and our plate sits, filled with store-bought potato salad and a microwaved hot dog. What do you feel would be missing?

I am just as guilty of being enticed by the sound of a new email when it arrives, or the ping of a text, as you are. As our days are so hectic, we keep trying to squeeze more in our days with the same twenty-four hours we always had. Our workloads are so large that we, oftentimes, in order to finish a task or to get an answer, blurt out a text or craft an email to a friend, client, or colleague instead of picking up the phone, scheduling a lunch meeting, or walking down the hall to someone's office. We feel that *we don't have the time* for that personal interaction, and sometimes we just don't want to be involved or bothered.

But in reality, we actually get more and can even learn more when we sometimes choose to forsake technology and put in effort to connect face-to-face, or at least via the phone. I find it sad that in today's world, face-to-face and voice-to-voice are secondary to digital communication. A friend of mine has a twelve-year-old daughter who says that none of her friends call her, they just text her, and she loves the fact her dad always calls her on the phone. He is the only one. A 2018

Oxford Economics reported study confirms, unsurprisingly, that digital connections are much more common across the nation than personal interactions. It states that adults are almost twice as likely to interact “several times a week or more” with friends and family they don’t live with via text or instant message than by meeting up with them in person, or calling them on the phone (*Oxford Economics*, “The Sainsbury Living Well Index,” May 2018).

Going back to my block party comments, this same study mentions that baby boomers, working or not, scored slightly higher than average on social connection indicators. This higher-than-average score is because they have more neighbor interactions and probably remember and have experienced a block party, or at minimum, know their neighbors’ names and converse with them on a regular basis in person. They state that around one in five baby boomers chat to their neighbors most of the time, compared to less than one in ten adults from younger generations.

I am concerned about how I see technology easily and unconsciously driving us apart. Under the guise of efficiency, expedience, and productivity, digital technology has allowed us to communicate differently and extensively, no doubt with FaceTime, video chat, texting, and emailing, but I believe technology also isolates and blocks us from having a true connection. We are slowly destroying our humanity and removing all human touch points, electively, by choosing digital interactions first.

Instead of walking down the hall to talk to a colleague, we send them a text; instead of having a ten-minute conversa-

tion/meeting, we send them an email. Instead of meeting colleagues or clients in person or over lunch, we conduct a Webex video conference. For many of us that work from home, virtual applications like Zoom and Skype make it easy for us to conduct business with clients and colleagues. Additionally, retailers like Amazon, Walmart, Chewy, and Target, just to name a few, make it a one-click wonder to order and have pretty much anything delivered, from dog toys to toilet-ries, within twenty-four hours to our doorstep. And, between meal-making services like Blue Apron, nearby grocery store chains, and mobile meal-deliver apps like Grubhub and DoorDash, we can have a plethora of dining and meal preparation options, such that we will never starve.

As a single woman living alone and working from home, I could literally exist in a solitary, isolated environment for days using the above stated resources. I could easily remove all true human touch points. However, I find when I have spent a day or two without much real social interaction, in order to complete a book, edit my inspirational speaking content, or a busy virtual day with consulting clients, I crave social interaction. I have an aching desire to get out and connect in person, with friends or family, or at minimum, if no one is available, take myself out to dinner in order to have some connection and conversation with the person sitting next to me.

The 2018 *Oxford Economics* study referred to earlier states that the frequency with which we meet, speak, and meaningfully connect with friends and family, neighbors, and others is shown to have a positive association with our

well-being and joy. Boy, do I feel this and live this every day. In contrast, they stated that there was no association, neither positive nor negative, between someone's well-being and interacting digitally with email, text messaging, or social media consumption, all else being equal. Their basic analysis states: *Real social connections* are essential to living well, and that digital interactions are no substitute.

How many of you have had the joy and pleasure of online dating? I have, and because of the many hilarious and unfortunate experiences, it quite possibly could be the subject of my next book. I find it extremely funny that online dating consists of writing a profile about yourself, including your hobbies, dislikes, must-haves for your future partner, your best physical attributes, and at minimum, at least three of the most attractive photos of yourself, preferably one in full length and of course no sunglasses. Then the online search begins with picture or profile likes, online messaging, and swiping right for like and left for dislike. It is all done two-dimensionally with visual and written clues that identify someone as attractive enough to be a potential date. What are we all seeking in this process? Are we all seeking love, attraction, and chemistry? Chemistry is the very substance of that dopamine of attraction.

What is missing on a two-dimensional dating site? It's that aura and intangible energy we can't predict or define, called chemistry. Hysterical! And, that chemistry can only be felt, truly be sensed, and defined to be a possible attraction, when we finally get the chance to meet our potential match in person. That same element of energy and aura of face-to-face

communication is why meeting and talking in person is so critical and adds so much value and meaning to our life. It is the energy that connects us and provides us with a sense of belonging and community. Needless to say, online dating has not been successful for me, despite knowing that many have been able to find their dream catch.

My fear is we are relying on digital technology in work and in our life too heavily and we are allowing it to replace efforts to create true connection with people in all areas of our life. If we choose to replace people with technology and rely less and less on our true human connections, we are setting ourselves and our kids up for severe depression, isolation, and being broken off.

From 1986 to the year 2000, the CDC states that the suicide rate declined steadily. In sharp contrast, from the year 2000 to 2014, the suicide rate in the United States rose 24 percent and is approaching a thirty-year high. What else do you think was going on around the year 2000? The World Wide Web as we know it started around 1992 and was quite robust by the year 2000, and from the year 2000 to 2014, mobile phone subscriptions exponentially increased to over five billion users throughout the world, and over three billion people access the internet on a regular basis. The Nokia phone, in 1996, was the first device with internet capabilities and the iPhone was first launched in June 2007. Psychological studies have suggested that there is a relationship between anxiety and the use of mobile devices, coupled with their ability to steal our attention away from true human connection (Shoukat 2019). Cell phones and digital technology create more separateness

and isolation between us and our family and friends and provide us with a temporary false dopamine fix. I am not surprised at this coincidental rise in suicide rates.

Just as calculators have destroyed the need to be able to do math, I am concerned the next generation won't be able to write a complete, correct, and meaningful sentence unless of course they incorporate five emojis and eighteen abbreviations. I am concerned that the art of customer service will resort to swiping left or swiping right.

Think about it: as mentioned in my isolation of being single and ability to work from home, we really don't have to communicate and connect with anyone; we can simply interact. We can avoid truly seeing, hearing, or feeling people as we never have to hear, see, or feel their facial expressions, their joy or disappointment, their anger or their elation. We can send a text, not respond to a text, send an email, delete the email, not have a conversation, delay a response, like, unlike, send an emoji, unfriend, friend, or swipe left, all at the expense of human connection and in an effort to disconnect.

Or, what about the art of ghosting? Can you imagine in the middle of a face-to-face conversation with someone, you just get up and leave with no closure, "excuse me," or goodbye? It would be considered quite disrespectful and downright rude. However, in the exchange of texting, it is quite common and acceptable. Really?

What happened to the art of breaking up with someone in person? Can you believe I have been broken up with over voicemail? And the last one was the worst—it was done over

a text. This is someone that I dated for over six months. Face-to-face communication can be difficult, but having an in-person conversation with someone is also showing up with true vulnerability, authenticity, and respect for the human experience. It is important for our humanity to feel and to connect, and to see the implication of our words or actions on other people versus allowing ourselves to disconnect from the emotion and go numb. We all have to get back to communicating in person verbally, not nonverbally, and to set up models of connected behavior for others or risk the threat of our offspring and future generations to grow up absent of any interpersonal skills.

Putting Digital Technology In Its Place

One of my favorite commercials for smartphones shows two men in suits at a conference table and one man gets up to leave to go to the bathroom. No sooner has the one man left the room when the cell phone on the conference table, near the remaining man, begins to ring. He picks up the cell phone and answers the call. Cut to the phone whereby an attractive woman is seen doing a strip tease dance to music. A minute after this has played out, the one man who had left the room opens up the door to the conference room and returns. Immediately, the man in the conference room shuts down the phone and places it on the conference table, and quickly announces, “Your wife just called.”

When and where is having your smartphone appropriate so that we leverage its value but ignore its temptation? Here are some of my suggestions from Kimberly’s Connection Tips: Test them out by slowly adopting them once a week or month

and gradually increase their frequency based on your success and others' receptivity.

Mobile-Free Meetings (MFM): Virgin America utilizes this technique in its meetings whereby any meeting invite that has a MFM designation is defined as a *mobile-free meeting*, which means that everyone leaves their phone(s) in their office, or deposits them into a basket at the entrance to the conference room. Everyone knows that for forty-five minutes, their full attention is focused on the conversation, and the meeting and agenda at hand for the highest level of contribution, collaboration, creativity, planning, productivity, and solutions. Everyone also knows that because the meeting is only forty-five minutes long, they will get the remaining fifteen minutes back of a typical sixty-minute meeting in order to interact with their phones to respond to emails, texts, etc. before they head back to their desk or their next meeting. Try to conduct at least one meeting a week as an MFM and see how your team reacts and how much gets accomplished. Progressively introduce more per month, where most appropriate.

Mobile-Free Meals: Like *mobile-free meetings*, there can be *mobile-free meals*. Leave the phones and the digital devices somewhere far enough away so you must get up and get it, or at minimum, turn it off, so that we are not tempted by the tune of an email, phone call, or text. I truly feel being present, listening, communicating, and enjoying a meal together is such a pleasure and one of the best experiences to create human connection. I am sure all of us have had the experience when meeting someone for lunch or dinner or having your

kid at the table and on his or her smartphone, of not being connected, let alone feeling and being heard. Breaking bread together is such an ancient, communal experience that not only feeds our stomachs, it feeds our souls (more to come later in “The Lost Meal” Chapter 7). Try to incorporate this rule at *all* your meals with colleagues, clients, friends, and family. At home, you may need to start off with one meal a week and fill that silence with conversation starters around the table, such as, “If you wanted to plan a vacation, where would you go?” or, “Tell me one good thing that made you happy today.” Even if there is some silence, eventually it will be filled with interesting conversation, personal insights, and you are starting on your way to improving your connections.

Talk and Touch: I call this the “KCC Three Points of Daily Connection.” (KCC stands for The Kimberly Connection Company.) Find three separate moments throughout your day. It can be mid-morning, mid-afternoon, and at the end of your day. It can be on your drive to work, a moment to break up your workday, and on your drive home. Find what works best and change it up each day. For example, instead of texting a friend in the morning, you could pick up the phone. Instead of emailing a colleague on an issue, you could walk down to their office or set up a lunch meeting. Toward the end of your day, again, instead of texting someone, you could pick up the phone and call, or possibly even stop by. Try these easy connection options:

- Instead of sending a text, pick up the phone and call
- Instead of sending an email, get up out of your chair and walk down the hall

- Instead of having a phone conversation or virtual meeting, meet in person or schedule a lunch or dinner meeting
- Reach out personally via phone or in person to someone you don't necessarily have an agenda, excuse, or need to call

By doing so, you will naturally increase your human points of connection, and probably feel a bit more joyful. I am also willing to bet that you will see an improvement in your relationships and connection with that client, colleague, friend, neighbor, or family member over time, when you introduce these three points of connection a day. I challenge you to seeing the connection correction in your own life.

Now that we have you reaching out and connecting in person, or at minimum, over the phone, let's get you ensuring that connection in person is the most fulfilling for both (and all) of you, in the next chapter.