

Cross-Cultural Worker Marriage Issues: Digital Distractions

During the last century changes in technology have brought about profound changes in how most people in the world live. During the last half century the digital revolution has changed how people relate, even in their marriages.

Two Millennia Ago

When Paul and Barnabas first served as cross-cultural workers, people had a more limited number of ways to communicate as mentioned in Acts 15.

- They could go in person and talk face to face so that both verbal and nonverbal cues were available (Acts 15: 4).
- They could tell another individual who would then go and repeat what was to be communicated (Acts 15:2). Adding that middle person could result in the message being changed.
- They could write a letter for someone to carry to the recipients (Acts 15:20). This meant that no additional clarification could help remove misunderstandings.
- They could use combinations of the above (Acts 15:22-31).

These examples are all found in communication between the first and second terms of cross-cultural service.

Most of the New Testament epistles are letters written to relatively young national churches or pastors of these churches. These letters were written by veteran cross-cultural workers or church leaders at headquarters in Jerusalem. The letters include advice,

warnings, and greetings to individuals at the church plants.

Two Centuries Ago

Little had changed when William and Dorothy Carey went to India as cross-cultural workers in the late 18th century. They still traveled on foot, on horseback, and by sailing ship. They communicated in person, by sending oral messages via a third person, and by writing letters.

However, in the 19th century changes occurred when people invented the telegraph, the telephone, and the radio.

- Letters of the alphabet could be coded into dots and dashes, sent great distances via electrical impulses over lines, and decoded at the other end with the telegraph.
- Voices could be coded into electrical impulses, transmitted over lines, and transformed back into voice-like sounds with the telephone.
- Voices could be coded into electromagnetic radiation, sent through the air, and transformed back into voice-like sounds at the other end with radio.

No longer did people have to be actually present, send an oral messenger, or write a letter to communicate.

Today

At the beginning of the 21st century with the digital revolution we have many additional ways of communicating, and these may become issues in marriages.

During the last half of the 20th century with the development of the computer, information could be digitally coded so that it was readily available. This brought about

huge changes in communication and entertainment readily available to cross-cultural workers all over the world. New means are continually being developed, but here are some available at the time of writing.

- Cell phones: People can converse, leave oral messages, or leave written ones.
- Email: People can send written messages for others to read at their convenience.
- Skype: people can converse orally via their computers and even see each other if they have webcams—free of charge.
- Facebook and MySpace: People have social networks around the world.
- Blogs and YouTube: People can post thoughts and videos for others to read, hear, and see.
- Internet: It has news from home as well as information from everywhere—and pornography.
- Chatrooms and instant messaging.
- Satellite TV and Radio, Podcasts—the list becomes longer every year.
- DVDs, personal viewers, and iPods allow people to carry thousands of songs and movies anywhere with them.
- Personal Digital Assistants (PDA), such as the Palm and Blackberry, allow people to carry their work and all of the above literally in their pocket.

Cross-cultural workers find the above extremely valuable. They can find needed information at the click of a mouse, reach group decisions without traveling thousands of miles, stay in touch with family and friends and so forth. No one wants to go back to more primitive methods. However, these may distract from more important things, such as your marriage.

General Issues

These inventions have raised concerns in many areas, such as transportation and business. The digital revolution has greatly improved transportation, but it has also played a part in train, plane, and automobile accidents. It has revolutionized some things in business, but it has also sometimes resulted in lower creativity and productivity.

- Multitasking. At the end of the twentieth century people said the new generation could multitask, could listen to the TV, talk on the phone, and study—all at the same time. Psychologists have long maintained that people can attend to only one thing at a time. Recent research shows that when people “multitask,” they just rapidly shift their attention from one thing to another rather doing more than one thing at a time.
- Interruptions. When people stop to answer a phone or read an email, the interruption is much more than the few seconds to listen or read. It is usually 10-15 minutes before they can refocus and proceed on their original task.
- Boundaries. Before this revolution, when one went home, other relationships and tasks were left behind. However, with a digital device in one’s pocket, that boundary is no longer in place. Anyone with your number or address can reach you at any time you have it on.
- Time. Work and entertainment can also be carried into your home in your pocket. This may mean time taken from your family or time you spend with God himself. As such, it is an issue of the stewardship of time.

When Barak Obama became President of the USA, he had to “fight” to keep his PDA. The major concern was that

he might receive an email alert, instant message, or text message that would distract his attention during an important briefing.

Specific Marriage Examples

Of course, here we are not as concerned about national security as we are about marriage relationships. Here are some issues that can arise.

- Relationship with spouse. Your spouse may begin to feel like he or she is not very high on your list of priorities and come to resent your digital devices.
- Relationships with colleagues. If one partner becomes overly attached to digital activity, the couple may not interact with other expats in their agency or in their city. Such interaction is vital to marriages, especially if the couple have children.
- Lose real contact. A person enmeshed with digital distractions may not recognize problems with family and spouse, not know that anything is wrong until too late.
- Giving impressions. Checking a cell phone to see who is calling or reading text messages may give the impression that people are not giving their full attention to their spouses, even if it is discrete glance below the table.
- Sexual fantasy. Even if one is never caught viewing pornography on the Internet, such activity still results in another fantasized person in the marital bed.
- Drain on time. When one spends hours keeping up with “friends” on Facebook, viewing DVDs, or playing electronic games, it may mean less time for the physically present spouse.

A February 2009 article in *Newsweek* is titled, “Will the Blackberry sink the Presidency?” Stopping to spend 15 minutes

with your Blackberry may not sink your marriage, but it may cause your spouse to question your relationship to him or her.

What can be done?

Though problems may arise through digital distractions, here are suggestions to minimize the likelihood.

- Discuss these issues with your spouse and agree on steps you can take to prevent problems.
- Schedule daily time with your spouse.
- Turn off your cell phone or PDA before arriving at home to set a boundary and prevent interruptions.
- Check email and voice mail only at agreed on times, such as four times a day or not more than once every three hours, when with your spouse.
- Take steps to avoid pornography on the Internet, and have specific planned steps to escape it when it appears.
- Set a limit on how much time you spend each day on Facebook or other social networks.
- Limit how much time you spend watching DVDs and playing electronic games so that you have time for personal social interaction.
- Tell your colleagues the times you will be available (“on call”), and turn your digital device off at other times. Of course, during times of emergency this may not be possible.
- Take time for yourself, your spouse, and your family. Otherwise you may burn out, or your marriage may crash and burn.

All of these suggestions are specific steps people can take to set priorities in the stewardship of time. Remember that all—rich and poor, old and young—get the same 24

hours in every day. How they use that time depends on their priorities.

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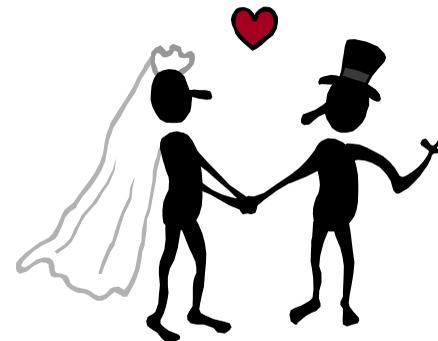
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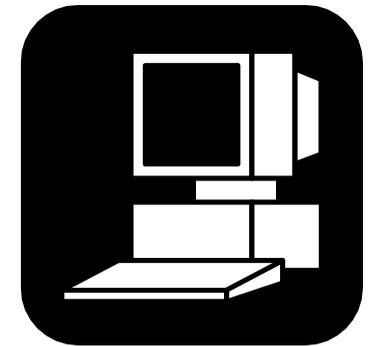
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