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e-Musement and A-musement: Transmitting Humor Throughout the Workplace

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With the Internet, email, and the integration of various new electronic devices into our everyday lives, humorous material (such as cartoons, jokes, pictures, anecdotes, sounds bytes, greeting cards, etc.) is circulating throughout the workplace in astronomical proportions! New communication technology—with the capacity to electronically transmit large quantities and varieties of “funny” material—has provided a vehicle through which employees can share amusing “tid-bytes” with great speed and efficiency. “Front-line” jokers and pranksters are now being joined by their more reserved co-workers, as employees who were previously observers in this comedic universe are now becoming more involved as distributors of e-comic material.

High-Tech/High-Touch

In his revolutionary book, *Megatrends*, John Naisbitt suggested that, as our “high-tech” society grows, “high-touch” interactions will develop as a counterforce to the high-tech revolution. As the availability of humor expands through the use of electronic means (particularly the Internet), is there a countermovement of high-touch? While jokes shared through email inundate our inboxes, are we merely transmitting our humor by forwarding email and distributing hard copies or are we *interpersonally* and *interactively* connecting with others as we share humorous material? As high-tech humor floods our electronic desktops, and depending on how **we choose** to respond the electronic distribution of humor, the e-humor revolution (counter to Naisbitt’s prediction) may result in a

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decrease in the “high-touch” quality of our humor.

While there has been little study on this topic and these questions are currently unanswered, we have the ability to influence the quality of humor now and in the future. High-tech transmission of funny files has a place in, and will certainly remain an integral part of, society’s workplace. We have however, the capacity to balance the electronic humor explosion by continuing to infuse high-touch humor into our own workplace culture and environment.

High-Tech

Today’s technology permeates virtually every workplace environment making it easy to capture a moment of humor from the literally hundreds of thousands of humor web sites. While that is an exciting possibility for those of us who want a daily dose of humor, it also makes it too easy for us to eliminate the “middle man or woman” from our humor (and human) interactions. When reading a humorous email, we miss the personal connection with the individual who shared the humor with us. Without this human “touch,” receiving the e-humor may be appreciated, but the “interaction” lacks depth and substance as we become one of many recipients on the sender’s “group list.”

High-tech humor may be *personally* but not *interpersonally* stimulating. While brief moments of e-humor may provide a chuckle, a flash of joy, or a sense of perspective, these periods fail to nourish the bond that can develop between co-workers when they share high-touch humor. High-tech humor is efficiently delivered, but lacks the physical and emotional “connections” as well as the visual and auditory cues (such as eye contact, laughter, smiles, gestures, etc.) that accompany high-touch humorous interactions.

High-Touch

The shared *experience* of high-touch humor between colleagues is generally remembered on a cognitive level (the content of the humor) *and* on an emotional level (the experience of the mutual connection). High-touch humor, when recalled, can recapture the pleasant sensations experienced during the initial interaction.

The receiver of high-touch humor might later communicate that humor to another co-worker in the following way, “You know Sally, in Human Relations? She told me the funniest story that I want to tell you. It makes me laugh just to think about it.” This individual not only remembers the content of the original humor but emotionally recaptures some

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of the pleasure experienced during the initial telling. In comparison, the receiver of high-tech humor might say to a co-worker, "I forwarded a funny email to you. Someone in the Human Relations department distributed it. I can't remember it well enough to tell it to you, but I think you will enjoy it."

In the case of the high-tech humor, content need not be remembered (since it is electronically forwarded) and it is likely that no sense of connection or pleasure associated with the initial experience will develop. In the interchange above there is no exchange of the content of humor between co-workers, and only an alert that a humorous item has been transmitted electronically is shared. Since the content is barely remembered or mentioned, it is communicated electronically in a sterile yet accurate mode that loses the emotional pleasure, as well as the interpersonal energy of its high-touch counterpart.

High-touch humor is generally shared within a small group. That group frequently has a personalized common history or shared context, and the humor is likely to be tailored to the members of the group. High-touch humor is highly interactive, and those experiencing it may laugh together, begin to exchange

additional humor, physically touch each other, and increase social interaction.

High-touch humor is *both personally and interpersonally* stimulating.

As our high-tech humor permeates the workplace, it is important for us to remember that high-touch humor can enhance the workplace environment. The integration of high-touch humor into the workplace can lighten the workload, enhance relationships, stimulate energy, reduce stress, foster creativity, and generally cultivate a pleasant working environment. Our challenge, as we receive humor electronically, is to create and maintain a healthy balance by committing ourselves (lest we be committed!) to the preservation of high-touch humor. It is this type of humor communication that can serve to keep our workplace environments pleasantly interactive and free from the impersonal sterility of high-tech isolation. If you are dedicated to maintaining high-touch interactions in a high-tech work environment, then commit yourself to daily transforming an electronic file of e-musement humor into an interpersonal interaction of A-musement with one of your co-workers. In so doing you will enhance your relationship and add a touch of levity to your daily routine.

