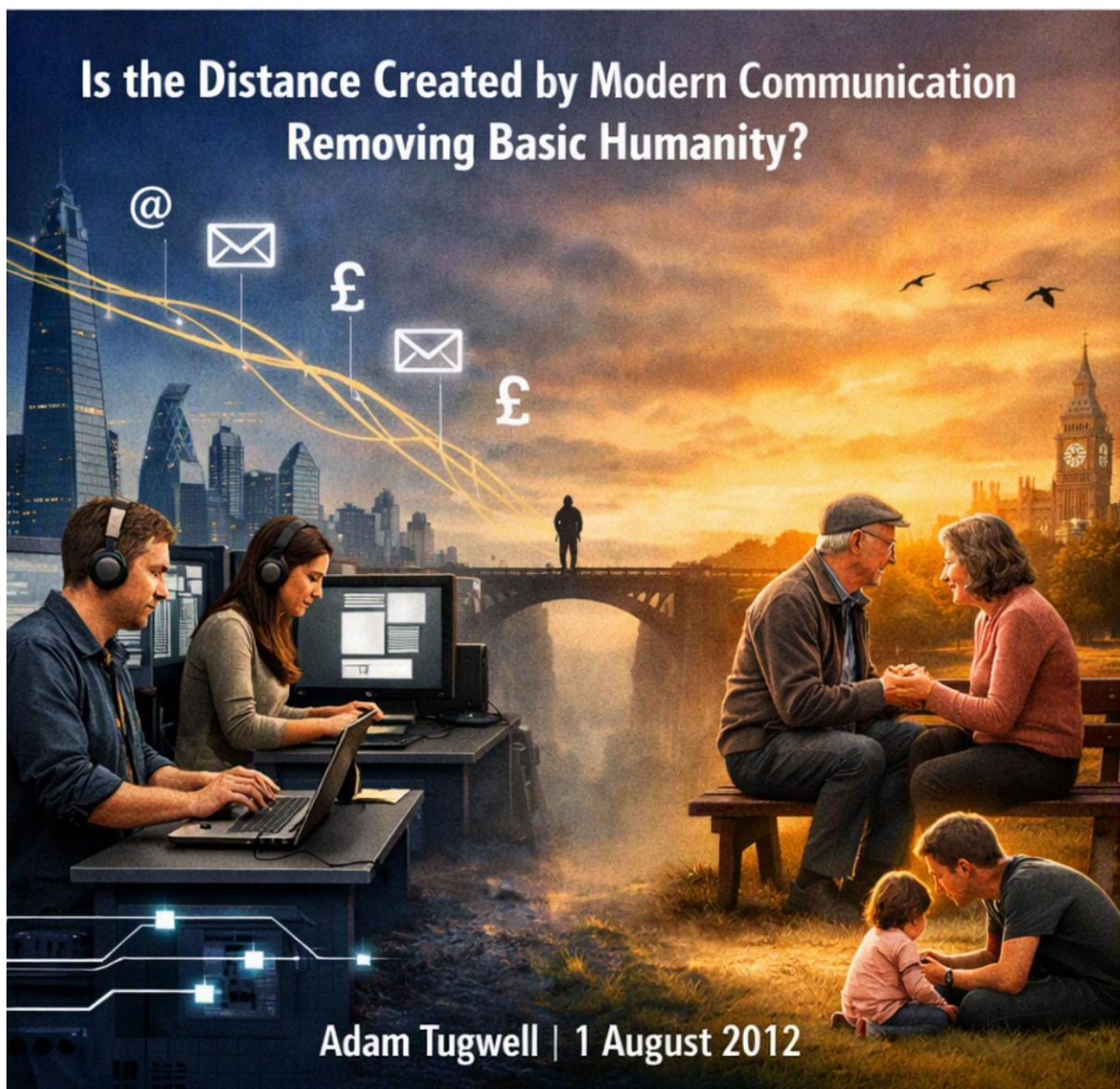


Is the distance created by modern communication and business methods removing basic humanity from our relationships and has the time come for a whole new set of rules?

Adam Tugwell | 1 August 2012



So what motivates you at work or within your business? Is it doing the very best job that you can; or is it simply to earn the greatest amount as quickly as possible and perhaps

keep yourself in that lucrative job that you already have, maybe progressing you to an even better paying or profiled position?

Whilst admitting that it leaves a bad taste in the mouth just as soon as the realisation dawns that other people may have noticed; for a growing number today it will be the latter and for very practical reasons that they may never really have even considered at that. Perhaps strange then that it's a feeling of guilt which often accompanies that understanding when it arrives, as few will ever argue that we would all like to earn more or have a better lifestyle if given the option to do so.

The reality is of course that people feel bad about making money when questioned, if they hadn't realised that it has become the purest motivation or aim in what they do, rather than being the very healthy side-effect of a career undertaking or vocation, and then doing it damn well.

With a growing concern about the ethics employed within business, not least of all illustrated by the [Libor scandal](#), one must ask if a loss of conscience is one of the very negative aspects that the distance created by increasingly elaborate supply chains and the rise of the Internet have created?

Many of us have simply adapted and in many cases thrived from the changes and opportunities brought into being by the rise of the Communication Age. So workers within Internet and information technology reliant businesses are perhaps excusably less aware of the fallout hitting customers they may never even see from decision making which is without a tangible fear or concern for the 'human factor'. One also wonders if they are therefore insulated from the future catastrophes they now have the power to create in what may seem little more than parallel lives, which to the more aware would only ever be dressed as distant elephants that look less than the size of a gnat on their horizon.

To perhaps emphasise the downside of distance more effectively, I will take a step back to an industry that we all love to hate. A profession that has always had the benefit of distance between business and customer once they have been commissioned; but a distance which is also created by time and process rather than by the remote contact of a broadband cable.

Within the property market, many are quick to become cynical of the inflation-setting-overpricing of houses and wonder how they find themselves unable to afford even a modest home.

Some would blame the gargantuan super-tanker that was 'right-to-buy' as set in motion by Margaret Thatcher, but can quickly forget how it was that very act in the first place which encouraged massive property ownership within parts of society where people would never have dared even dream of being homeowners before her tenure, and

perhaps led to those very same people being able to aspire to making such dreams their reality to begin with.

Others would look perhaps more accurately to the realms of Estate Agents who have ruthlessly pushed prices up and up, month-after-month and year-after-year in order to secure greater and greater percentage based sales fees.

Estate Agents actually do a job that they could choose to do very well on sensible margins – even in a good market. But repeat custom is to them a very long game and if someone else is saying they can sell a house for more, it doesn't take much excuse to follow or to lose out because the risks to them seem very distant indeed.

After all, very few owners will willingly lose many thousands of pounds on a sale just because one agent tells them what its actually worth, when another says different. The agent who 'does what it says on the can' will have 'priced to sell' and done what they were commissioned to do, whereas the second agent plays the long game, watching the market rise to the price they suggested, thereby getting the fee they want but paying little note of the pain that their customer experiences in the meantime. No wonder then, that so many Estate Agency businesses have stopped trading or been forced to make substantial cutbacks during the economic crisis.

The long-term effects of such business practices are potentially incalculable and one can only speculate on just how overpriced our homes now actually are, and how far back in time standards of living and subsequent social mobility could actually be pushed as a result of the out-pricing of starter homes for young people; a situation created purely on the basis of making higher and higher margins for just a few without any apparent risk to the many from doing so.

So with the rise of the Internet and information technology, many more businesses now find themselves enjoying a distance between themselves and customers which is to such a degree that the abuse of such apparently lucrative opportunities could create all manner of future problems, which may only ever become apparent much further down the line.

For instance, a once heavily hands-on recruitment industry which only a few years ago interacted with perhaps every candidate who made the effort to post them a CV, has been replaced by one which has discovered a seemingly bombproof level of security from risk of losing fees by targeting 'perfect fit' or tick box candidates, simply by focusing on electronic advertising and administration techniques. 800 applications through an Internet Job Board sounds a lot to handle; but not if you have set up a machine to identify perhaps a minimum of 8 'keywords' or phrases from 10 in those CV's before the hand of a human with any kind of feeling will go anywhere near them.

Nobody talks about the longer-term threat to hiring businesses of all shapes and sizes that comes from recruiting candidates from what by default effectively becomes a closed field of applicants who only know and understand a specific discipline within business, illustrated by the use of a series of words. Words which may themselves actually just be buzzwords or the esoteric ensemble of a recent graduate.

And why in purest profitability terms should recruiters care when today's bottom line is secure and they achieved it with the benefit of never having to even speak to perhaps 3 times as many candidates as they actually did. Candidates who may have provided the recruiter's customer with benefits and untold added value which they never had the chance to see but paid for nonetheless. A situation leaving perhaps the best candidates finding themselves removed from the running by a software package that reduced the time involved for the recruiter to all but a mere fraction of what they would have 'wasted' otherwise.

It is quite concerning that labour and cost saving technology for one business can itself create the opposite effect not just for one, but potentially many others. But then if you also look at the dark-art-creativity of the financial sector and money-making ideas such as cereal futures and funds that own shares in supermarkets and dairy processors, you can quickly begin to see just how the mechanics of distance and its ability to negatively affect the lives of many people actually are. After all, what is 1p on the price of a pint of milk every couple of days when you had a £1 Million bonus last year?

On the one hand, technical advances and the heralding of an information-based communication age encouraging openness and sharing is driving a potentially buyer-led age where businesses have no option but to sell on the basis of making 'just enough' profit and delivering quality on time every time.

On the other, the opening of doors to many more 'golden-egg' opportunities which are great for those picking up the product as it is found, but like the ever expanding and deepening ripples from a tiny stone tossed into a still pond, can cause mayhem and disaster in places that they had never even considered.

So the question needs to be asked; Is the distance created by modern communication and business methods removing basic humanity from our relationships and has the time come for a whole new set of rules?

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