The Crisis of Presenteeism: Maintaining Our Focus While Harnessing Technology's Benefits

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Let me begin by stating what an immense privilege it has been to be your leader this past year. The Eastern Academy of Management (EAM) is truly an amazing organization, filled with intelligent, thoughtful, and caring people. As I prepared for this presentation, I wondered what I could possibly say that would be useful to this audience—an audience that is filled with so many highly informed people who know much more than I do about many things. I decided on a topic that I believe is truly having a profound impact on our lives.

Today I'd like to share some thoughts with you about what I call the "Crisis of Presenteeism," and the implications this has for our managerial scholarship within EAM and beyond. Instead of labeling it presenteeism, I might have termed it technology-induced presenteeism, psychological involvement, or even mental absenteeism, but let's not get bogged down in terminology at this point. If you recall our program theme this year, "Management 2.0," it speaks to the need for new theories, new models, and new ways of teaching, to accommodate the changed world in which we live. It is hard to talk about the world today, or the future of management research and practice, without also considering the role that technology will play in it. In this age of mobile smartphones, it seems important to reflect upon our use of technology, and what it means for the future of management thought.

So let me illustrate what I mean by the problem of presenteeism, and then I'll discuss a few implications for all of us. To do this, let me start with a few examples. As a first example, consider how a number of major news outlets have featured articles about the increased rates of injuries suffered by young children (Epstein, 2014; Scelfo, 2010; Worthen, 2012). These articles discuss statistics about the dramatic increase in emergency-room visits for children suffering from falls and other accidents that occurred on playgrounds. Indeed, the Consumer Product Safety Division of the U.S. government has noted that injuries on playground equipment among children under 5 years old has jumped by 17% between 2007 and 2010, injuries on nursery equipment have jumped 31%, and injuries involving swimming pools have jumped 36% (Worthen, 2012). These rapid increases in injuries come after years of decline, and despite the vast advances that have been made the past few decades making playgrounds safer, by incorporating new safety features and designs, new rubberized matting, absorbent materials, and the like.

What experts have been concluding is that it isn't faulty designs in playgrounds or other equipment that are leading to these injuries, but rather it is the lack of attention from parents or guardians, due to mobile phone use, while their children are playing (Worthen, 2012). It appears that mobile devices are distracting parents from adequately watching over their children (e.g., Morrongiello & House, 2004). Other groups of researchers have conducted a series of studies in which they observed parents while their children were on playgrounds, and found that parents were often absorbed in their mobile devices while their kids were playing (Epstein, 2014; Nasar & Troyer, 2013).

Moreover, it is interesting to note that parents generally report that they are only on their mobile devices for a few seconds at a time, when in fact video evidence shows that they can be absorbed for upward of 3 minutes at a stretch (Worthen, 2012). In essence, parents do not think that they are distracted from watching their children, when in fact the evidence showed that they are. In effect, even though parents are physically present, they are not mentally present. They exhibited presenteeism due to their distraction with technology, since they were not mentally aware of their surroundings.

Let me share with you another more well-known example that illustrates the issue of presenteeism and our inability to multitask effectively. We surely all know about the dangers of texting and cell-phone use while driving. Significant empirical data exist in this realm. Studies of people in driving simulators show the dramatic effects of people who are on cell phones, and the rapid increase in both the number and the severity of

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accidents. We have indisputable data on accident rates, stopping distances, impact speeds, and a large number of other metrics (e.g., Benden, Smith, Henry, Congleton, 2012; Consiglio, Driscoll, Witte, & Berg, 2003; Donmez, Boyle, & Lee, 2009; Garner, Fine, Franklin, Sattin, & Stavrinos, 2011; Leung, Croft, Jackson, Howard, & McKenzie, 2012; O'Connor, Whitehill, King, Kernic, Boyle, Bresnahan, Mack, & Ebel, 2013). It is also worth noting that when these same people are interviewed afterward, many do not believe that their driving ability was significantly impaired when they used mobile phones (Cook & Jones, 2011). I guess it is like how many of us complain about other drivers on the road—we all think it is the other person who is driving inappropriately. It is rarely us. Social psychologists have long noted these types of cognitive biases that warp our accurate perceptions of reality (Bandura, 1991; Feldman, 1981; Hallion & Ruscio, 2011).

In both of these examples, people are using technology and are physically present, but not mentally present and are not able to multitask effectively. Study after study repeatedly shows that we do not multitask well, particularly for cognitively demanding tasks (e.g., Adler & Benbunan-Fich, 2012; Holm, Lukander, Korpela, Sallinen, & Müller, 2009; Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010; Nagata, 2003; Rosen, Lim, Carrier, & Cheever, 2011). In our own lives, we no doubt see this every day. How many times have you sat in a meeting, where people are on their laptop or other mobile device, doing things that are totally unrelated to the meeting? I don't dare look around the room right now! Surely you've noticed this in your own classrooms. We have all observed students being distracted by their laptops or mobile phones. They may be reading or sending e-mails, surfing the Internet, or sending texts. Many of us probably get frustrated by this, since they are not paying attention (e.g., Mortkowitz, 2010). These students are not fully engaged in the classroom experience.

I highlight this topic of presenteeism today, or the mere physical presence while being mentally absent from our surroundings, to bring to your attention this growing phenomenon that I believe has important implications for the future of management research and practice.

Before I go further, however, let me state unequivocally that I am a tremendous fan of technology. Really I am! As many of you know, early in my career I worked as an aerospace engineer associated with the space shuttle program and was involved in the development of several satellite systems. I realized the incredible positive effect that technology can have on our lives. Technology has saved countless lives, made our lives healthier and longer, and created countless enjoyable ways for us to live.

I also recognize that when it comes to technology, we can never know enough. I see what my students are doing on their phones and laptops, and I am amazed! Aren't you? I was recently showing a teenager a new website that I found, which I thought was pretty neat. The teenager's response was (if I can say it using the right tone of voice), "Oh, that is *soo* last year!!" Many of you no doubt have had similar experiences with teenagers.

So, as we look to the future of management research and practice, and to the future of EAM, I think it is important to consider how technology is changing us, and to be aware of issues like presenteeism, if we are to continue to grow and to flourish. Our organization, the Eastern Academy of Management, is guided by the motto: "Where Scholarship and Collegiality Meet." Let's look at both scholarship and collegiality. Let me pose three sets of questions for you to consider.

First, let's consider scholarship. To me, scholarship is about both research and teaching. It is about high-quality and impactful research, and it is about high-quality and impactful teaching. Research makes a difference when it is well carried out and communicated, when it sheds new insights, and when it uncovers and explains important phenomena. Similarly, teaching makes a difference when you share important knowledge, when you help others think and grow in new and important ways, and when you ignite the passion to learn more.

Let's consider now a few questions. First, in our research, how do we harness the new capabilities offered by technology, while realizing that presenteeism is a growing concern? What new models and theories do we need? Should our theories and models about managerial behaviors be modified? Do we need a new theory of the firm to incorporate our new realities? Can we collaborate differently, and more effectively? Clearly, there are no easy answers.

Consider now our teaching. How do we change the way that we teach, to accommodate the new behaviors and mindsets of our students? You probably realize that the students currently in our classes today are the first generation to *never* have known the world without mobile phones and the Internet (Richtel, 2010). Researchers have called these students digital natives (Gardner, 2014). These students know of nothing else. It is like the light bulb and refrigerator for us. It has always just been there.

Emerging research suggests that these students actually learn differently than we do, as a result of the way in which they have been brought up using technology. There is research emerging in the neuroscience field that is mapping brain activity, and showing how this new generation of students actually processes information in different ways (Carr, 2010, 2011; Penny, Friston, Ashburner, Kiebel, & Nichols, 2011; Wallis, 2010). As a result of what is termed neuroplasticity, these students' brains are actually formed in new ways as they use technology, due to the neural pathways that are formed (Greenfield, 2009). As educators, we have to figure out ways to adapt to the students' way of processing information, so that we can help them learn and absorb important knowledge.

I mentioned EAM's motto of scholarship and collegiality, and I've given you a few thoughts on scholarship, so let me briefly talk about collegiality. In regard to collegiality, how do we harness technology to make us more fully connected as an

organization? EAM is built on providing a collegial environment for our professional growth. We work hard to provide constructive feedback on our papers (as any past or present Track Chairs in this room can attest). We offer a supportive environment to test out new ideas, and I think we do a really good job of it!

But are we fully present for each other? Are there ways, perhaps through video conferences and virtual town hall meetings, where we could connect more fully and more often? As you probably noticed we have a newly designed EAM website (http://www.eaom.org), but as we look to our future, we need to go much further than a website to foster our connections, and to further enhance our collegiality. The EAM leadership team this year has been actively discussing the possible future directions for EAM. Should we offer webinars? Or periodic video chats? Or, should EAM host an avatar conference instead of one that takes place in person? Now I don't think we will be hosting an avatar conference anytime soon, but as we contemplate the future, we need to seriously consider new ways to connect throughout the year. And as we do so, we need to make sure that technology is used in such a way that it enables us to be more fully present with each other, rather than less.

Third and last, I ask you to consider our own personal behaviors when using technology in our daily lives. Are we the parent on the playground fully immersed in our mobile device while our children play? Do we always check our mobile phone while at dinner or lunch with friends and family, instead of being fully focused on them? Are we the colleague distracted in our own e-mails while at a faculty meeting, rather than being both physically and mentally present in the conversation that is occurring around us? Essentially, do our own behaviors exemplify both the physical and mental presence that we are proud of?

In closing, my comments to you today are meant simply to highlight this growing issue of presenteeism, and to raise questions about how this may have important implications for EAM, as well as many other aspects of our lives. As we go forth into the next 50 years for EAM, we need to continue to harness technology to foster our scholarship and our collegiality. We need to also think carefully about how we are using technology, to truly enable all the wonderful things we do here at EAM.

I hope my comments to you today encourage you to more fully consider this topic and, in the tradition of EAM, spur you to engage in thoughtful and interesting conversations throughout the rest of the conference and beyond. This year, I have truly been honored to serve as your president, and I thank you for the opportunity to lead this wonderful organization. Thank you.

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