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Tech reliance a sign of the times

Imperative to reconnect with the living world

[Tom Carney](#) / North Shore News

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I never had a smartphone when I was working and I still don't.

Many of my former colleagues, on the other hand, are glued to their smartphones. They aren't alone.

In a poll by Time magazine one in five people reported checking their phone every 10 minutes and a third of people said that even brief periods of time without their mobile devices resulted in feelings of anxiety.

Like it or not, most of us rely on the latest technology to get our work done.

Clifford Nass, a Stanford University professor, was one of the first to recognize that the technology we use in the workplace, like our computers, cellphones and social media, aren't just tools like hammers or screwdrivers. These things talk, they have a relationship with us and they can make us feel good or bad.

One of his most publicized research projects was a 2009 study on multitasking. Multitasking is all the rage these days and that's not necessarily a good thing. Multitasking shortens our attention span and makes it more difficult to concentrate, says Nass. He's worried that in our increasingly screensaturated world we may be creating people who are unable to think well and clearly.

I was never much of a multitasker. I had enough trouble doing one thing at a time. Actually, most days I couldn't wait to get out of the office and into the community.

Last year, for example, our team met face to face with hundreds of seniors across the North Shore to share the results of our Age Friendly Survey and the only technology in the room was a microphone.

We talked in small groups about the issues that were important to us and we spoke to each other about our vision for an age-friendly community in compelling terms.

Now don't get me wrong. Granted, I'm no poster boy for the latest technology, but I'm not a Luddite. I'm not suggesting for a moment that seniors should not embrace technology but, like Nass, I worry about how we relate to technological devices socially and how those interactions affect the way we interact with people.

My wife saw a sign in a store recently that read, "Customers talking on their cell phones will not be served."

I'd call that a sign of the times. Technology may help to make us more productive - the jury is still out on that one - but it does not make us more human. In fact, in his most recent work, Nass suggested that the increasing use of media and social media is eroding our social and emotional development.

Dr. Nass passed away last month in California at the age of 55.

"The moral of this story is really clear," he said, in a talk at Stanford last year. "We've got to make face to face time sacred, and we have to bring back the saying we used to hear all the time and now never hear, 'Look at me

when I talk to you." Tom Carney is the former executive director of the Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. Ideas for future columns are welcome. tomcarney@telus.net

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