

The Efficiencies of Meandering

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Could being productive really be so effortless?

As society moves at an ever-increasing pace, thanks in large part to technological advances that allow instantaneous communication, I often wonder, "Are we really more efficient?" Do smartphones, e-mail, text messaging and the like actually save time and add quality to our lives?¹ Or do they sometimes work against us?

These questions came to my mind recently when, after pouring over dozens of e-mails and sending my replies into cyberspace, I decided it was time for a break. I headed to the hospital cafe for some tea. As is my habit, I took the more "scenic" route, which allows me to pass by plants, artwork and floor-to-ceiling windows looking out onto a spacious courtyard. This path also puts me in the flow of the main hospital with all the comings and goings of a typical day. It lifts my spirits as I witness the variety of people who make up a busy academic health center – students, faculty, patients, staff and volunteers.

On this particular day, I intentionally slowed my pace, pausing at the art exhibit, enjoying the sunlit halls and noting the seasonal changes of the courtyard trees. Along the way, I ran into a teaching colleague I had been intending to e-mail, a fellow committee member I needed to ask a question of, a student I had been wanting to connect with and a librarian helping me with a research paper. I even popped by the administration office to follow up on something in person, and, low and behold, it turned into a spontaneous mini-meeting with the director.

These serendipitous interactions occurred one after another and took only a few moments each, but they were remarkably productive. The experience was quite

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different from the one-way e-mail texts I had previously been immersed in. Not that e-mail lacks any utility, but a face-to-face dialogue, with its unique dynamics and rich exchange of ideas, is almost always greater than the sum of a string of electronic monologues.

As I began the path back to my office, I could not help but reflect on the elegance of what had just happened. My meandering had resulted in the completion of an incredible amount of follow-up work as well as resolution of several pressing issues. And it all seemed so much more personable and humane than sitting in my subterranean office churning out e-mails.

The entire experience gave me pause. It is so easy to become entrenched in our day-to-day work – seeing patients, stealing time for e-mail and desk work, and coming up for air only after several hours – that we forget that the rest of the world even exists. What a pleasant reminder my meandering journey afforded me – that person-to-person contact and communication possess unique dimensions that can yield more productive and efficient outcomes than we might imagine.

I smile now when I head out for my tea breaks, intentionally adding a few more here and there, taking my usual route and looking forward to the spontaneous meetings and interactions that may come. **FP**

Send comments to fpmedit@aafp.org.

1. Spiegelman J, Detsky AS. Instant mobile communication, efficiency, and quality of life. *JAMA*. 2008;299(10):1179-1181.