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? 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 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.