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## Why 100 percent online access isn't always a better offering

# DON'T LET FACE TO FACE BE ECLIPSED BY TECHNOLOGY

Over the last 15 years more and more employees have obtained online access to internal communication such as email, intranets, webcasts and Web 2.0 social media. Is this a good thing? Perhaps not entirely, as Angela Sinickas discovered while mining her database recently.

A Danish client recently asked me to provide norms for its survey results not only from all companies in my database, but also norms just from companies where all employees completing the survey had online access (about one third of the entire database). At first I was surprised at how few differences there were. Then I was even more surprised at some of the differences I did find.

Two differences were not surprising. In companies where all employees have online access, they rated the timeliness and accuracy of information seven to nine percentage points higher than the average of all companies. I have little doubt this is due to the ease of getting out information more frequently online, and making corrections if necessary in real time. However, I saw improvements like this back in 1981 when I converted a monthly publication I edited to a weekly one – both in print. Frequent is better.

I was surprised that the all-online companies' employees were more likely to say the printed publication is useful to them. They also rated webcasts/videos as less useful than at companies overall, though they were more satisfied with the volume of audio/visual communication they were receiving. This may be due to the greater ease of distributing webcasts to online employees than showing videos or DVDs in group settings or on closed-circuit TV units in production areas.

### Face-to-face communication is different

While many supervisor and senior management communication skills were about the same on average at all companies, a few types of face-to-face interactions were more negative at companies with universal electronic access (see the graph below).

Supervisors were reported to be less likely to pass information downward to employees and less likely to encourage employees to make suggestions or share their ideas. The only way in which face-to-face communication was rated as better by all-online employees was in feeling comfortable proposing ideas to a supervisor. So, it seems that without online access, supervisors take a more active role in listening, but in online environments, it may be less threatening to volunteer ideas – probably in the form of an email.

Senior management was less visible at companies with 100 percent online access, and fewer employees had access to Town Hall meetings with executives. Plus, there was a nearly 20 percentage-point difference between how useful Town Halls were rated to be. This included both attendance at live Town Halls, as well as



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participating in virtual Town Halls as webcasts. It seems that either the format of Town Halls changes dramatically when they migrate online, or else observing one online just doesn't match the experience of being in the same room with senior leaders.

### Surprising non-differences

Both databases showed virtually the same results on most questions (within four percentage points or less). However, some of the most surprising ways in which the two groups showed no differences were: The satisfaction with the volume of information they were receiving in print, by email, through the intranet and face to face; how well informed they were on all surveyed topics; how much of the companywide publication they read; how relevant and credible the publication is, and the extent to which it helps them understand company strategy and feel positive about working at the company; their preference for continuing to receive a printed publication; and their overall satisfaction with internal communication.

So, what I took away from this deep dive into my database is that all the online communication we're doing hasn't made employees any better informed than they used to be in the days before we started speeding along the information superhighway, though they're getting that information faster and more accurately. The real danger we may need to address is not letting two-way, face-to-face communication get left behind in the dust.

Face-to-face communication variations for all online employees. (Copyright: Sinickas Communications, Inc.)

