

Global Mission Work is Different for “Digital Natives”

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It is a privilege for me to be able to travel globally and connect with mission leaders. I have good friends all over the world. I often joke with conference organizers, “THANKS so much for organizing this event so I can meet some of my friends!”

One of the things that those leaders tell me is that they are concerned about some of the newer “digitally native” global workers. Many received their first smart phone as a child. This is different than my married son in his 30s—who is a native *computer* user—but he doesn’t mess much with a smart phone.

These new workers grew up with a phone in their hand. The vast majority of what they know—real or not—in the world has come through images in their hands. So, as they go, one concern is how they will adjust when “friends” are defined less by proximity and more by social media presence. That feeds into how and what they communicate from the field. In many ways, it redefines what “field” and “home” are—which can be good.

Many do a good job of posting photos of the culture and what it is like to live there, just like their peers back home. And, that can be helpful. But, after a while, it can look to their friends like they are merely on a continual “destination vacation”...so people may wonder “what are they actually *doing*?”

Some do not produce a regular communication about their work—

digital or paper. They don’t seem to share much in the way of prayer requests.

Of course, many agencies require communications and in security related locations, they are smart enough to know that they can’t even post anything on social media.

I’ve found the book, *12 Ways Your Smart Phone is Changing You* by Tony Reinke to be helpful. Tony doesn’t tell his readers what to decide, but merely points out the changes in the way we think and act. For example, he points out things like the “addiction to distraction.”

I wrote about the way smart phones are distracting us in our May-June 2017 issue of *MF*. This time, my focus is on how phones actually change the way we work, learn and adjust. They can impact in good and bad ways. Cultural adjustment is difficult from the start. Will you ever learn a language well if every time you make a mistake or feel embarrassed with a cultural miscue, you turn to Instagram or Facebook? Can you exercise diligent focus on something that is new and disruptive to you?

The social media platforms are specifically designed to keep you on them. High paid developers spend their lives keeping you on Facebook for five more minutes. They also tend to make people all look great. People don’t post photos when they are crying or suffering (usually). It seems like everyone is always having a *better* day than you—till it is your turn to post something.

One group trying to make a difference in training the next generation of workers is Radius International

(www.radiusinternational.org). They do intensive, immersive nine-month pre-field training for workers going to Unreached Groups around the world. Among many elements of their training, like living in tight quarters, they do not allow them to have a mobile phone—smart or otherwise—except for one call to their family on Sundays each week.

Some from this training have found it hugely beneficial in helping new younger workers “detox” from the constant distractions of smart phones. That learned ability to focus has helped several I am aware of learn language and culture better.

There is no question that it is more challenging and complicated for everyone engaged in any kind of mission work to communicate well to those who pray and give—partly because the prayers and givers are distracted too!

Think about this for yourself (as well as those you are mentoring/discipling):

- How much time do you spend on distractions (be careful as you define that)?
- How easily are you distracted? Do you (like me) often forget why you picked up your phone?
- Is it distracting you from time in the Word of God or in prayer? Do you spend more time playing games or on social media than in the disciplines of faith?

If you have a suggestion, we might use your ideas in our upcoming podcast—focused on various themes of interest to globally-minded servants around the world. 