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## Encourage Social Networking, Without Discouraging In-Person Meetings

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Interacting through social media is the latest craze. Consumer applications like [Facebook](#), [wikis](#) and [Twitter](#), along with collaboration software such as [SharePoint](#)—not to mention e-mail and instant messaging—are supposed to make us more productive. Yet we seem to be developing an aversion to personal interaction that threatens to make us less effective, not more so.

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It's long been the case that people e-mail each other rather than get up and talk with their neighbors. People screen their calls and let them go to voice mail rather than talk to the person trying to reach them. We also avoid meetings. I know there are organizational dynamics that can make meetings awful, but it seems to me that we're using that as an excuse to avoid talking face to face. One senior manager told me that if a meeting is scheduled for more than an hour, he refuses to go.

There are good reasons for avoiding phone calls and meetings. Sometimes you don't want to be interrupted, and badly-run meetings are a waste of time. Social technology makes it easy for us to stay connected—and get work done—without personal contact. But we also need to bring people together to share information, strategize, brainstorm, network and build relationships. As CIOs who wish to marshal the benefits of social software, we must make sure we don't lose the benefits of personal, rather than virtual, interaction.

### Different Ways We Socialize

If you look at different generations, you can see a difference in their attitudes toward social interaction. People my parents' age regularly socialize with their friends in person. Whenever I invite my parents to a quiet restaurant they complain because they want to go somewhere bustling with "atmosphere." My friends and I are more content to e-mail, IM, chat on the cell, network on [LinkedIn](#) and socialize occasionally as a complement to our electronic communication. Generation Y uses online social networks intensely, but also places heavy reliance on getting together with peers in person.

Personality plays a role too. Introverts are drained by social interaction and prefer to work in solitude, with short periods of contact as necessary. Extroverts get energized by their dealings with others—but even for them, technology may be replacing the up close and personal.

### The CIO as Social Director

Given the diverse approaches that people have to interacting with others, how should a CIO manage the use of interactive technology? Clearly, social media and digital communications open up new



possibilities for information sharing and innovation. They are great for [collaborating](#) in a geographically dispersed environment, providing feedback and sharing ideas generally. We should pursue them vigorously.

At the same time, we need to be mindful that we encourage appropriate levels of face-to-face interaction. In particular, being in the same room trumps long-distance communication when you want to give constructive criticism or need to work through challenging problems. Streaming bits and bytes will never replace looking someone in the eye, watching for informal cues and sharing real-life experiences.

The key is to ensure that we synthesize technology with opportunities for direct human interaction so that we enable a diverse set of capabilities. For example, you can webcast a meeting for 50,000 employees around the world and follow it with in-person, question-and-answer sessions in local offices. And you can capture the feedback from these local meetings to a centralized knowledge-base for follow-up action. This is the balance that is needed between virtual and real.

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