Not too long ago, everyone worked in cubicle farms, encountering colleagues constantly in meetings and walking the floor. Having conference calls (rather than in-person meetings) was a rarity. Everyone worked with people they knew well, people who were often friends or at least great lunch dates.

Now, it is possible to spend most work days engaging with people you've never even met. Even in an office, you may find your primary contacts are not located in that office. The Gen Y crowd thinks nothing of deeming a Facebook contact a “BFF,” when all they know about the person were the short updates and pictures the person posted. For the rest of us, this disconnect can feel unsettling. But with an international workforce and many employees who never enter an office, what gets lost when you never actually meet your co-workers?

Online dating has really provided a model for the issues the virtual world presents to employees. Even if you have never used Match.com, we've all heard stories of how enlightening the first meeting was, even if the two spent a lot of time online first. The “date” didn't look the way they did online nor do they often have the same values and feelings you imputed from your e-conversations. In many ways, it seems you never really know a person if you haven't met them in person.

These same problems occur at work. Email and text messages are so abbreviated – personalities are not really clear from such short missives. And many people will be reluctant to “be themselves” until they really know you. In the past, in-person meetings began with some social chitchat and bonding. Online or phone meetings inspire much less of this (you don't know who might be listening or recording the conversation). Even after multiple interactions with a colleague, it would be fair to say that you don't really “know” the person. But once you have met someone in person, all future interactions are grounded in that encounter.

When we meet people, there is a certain amount of information sharing and sizing up of the person. We ask more questions in that situation and observe data points. A quick look at a person’s workspace also informs you as do their
way of working, talking and interacting with others. You just can’t “see” any of that online.

But if “face time” matters so much in your work life, how do you get yourself some? The ideal situation is where you can work in the same location as your most important co-workers. Daily encounters deepen relationships and lead to the kind of synergy that spawns innovation. But with globalization and the increasing number of people who work from home, the old office water cooler has gone virtual.

If you cannot work directly with your key co-workers, alternatives are needed. Take every opportunity to travel to other work locations and network like crazy. Use every second to connect with people who you have worked with virtually (or may work with in the future). Set up appointments (breakfast, lunch and drinks after work). You will never get enough opportunities to do this, so don’t squander them. And when you connect with them socially, you will deepen the relationship even more quickly.

Exploit any event, training or trade show. You will want to hang with close friends and meet people from different companies, but do not neglect the opportunity to meet remote co-workers. After one major merger, a colleague on the “right coast” invited all employees to meet at an evening party at a trade show. Bonds were formed that evening that helped us years later. We put a face to a name and populated that image with information about their interests, hobbies, families and more. Collect business cards and make some notes about the person to help jog your memory later. Even a short encounter can be enough to transform a relationship going forward. It’s also a great opportunity to revisit your opinion of someone and to even work out differences. It’s much easier to resent or despise someone you haven’t really met. Make sure you get some kind of offsite training or a conference each year to ensure you can keep up to date on your contacts.

As virtual interactions are more frequent in most cases than in person ones, you need to figure out how to make a virtual relationship work better. Post your picture on your company intranet and participate in forums. We all relate better to people whose faces we know. Invest in a webcam and get others to join in. It doesn’t have to be on all the time, but it is a great way to connect with people. Virtual face time is not a complete substitute, but you will find you can read some of the same information from the situation if you use your webcam to grow relationships.

To improve your face time connections, make sure that every second counts by preparing:
1. Invest in the favor bank. Do something nice for a colleague – help them on a project. Who doesn’t want to meet the person who bailed them out?
2. Write up a great LinkedIn reference for someone who helped you (and read their bio)
3. Share a little of your personal life and encourage/ask about theirs
4. Engage in a little small talk before a meeting starts, as you might in an in-person meeting
5. Share information about vacations and hobbies (briefly) on status calls.

While IMing, texting or emailing, remember the value of face time and make it a priority. It may not be easy, but it is priceless.

“You have to understand when it’s time to put the phone or the BlackBerry down and have a face-to-face. That’s a key moment of transition.”

~ Robbie Blinkoff

Stay tuned next month for another edition of “Your Career Coach.”