**Virtual safety is not safe**

The majority of safety and health professionals today make use of an array of technology tools – desktop computers (65%), smartphones (58%) and portable laptops (56%), according to a 2014 survey by *Industrial Safety & Hygiene News* magazine.

The survey also found 60% of professionals use a digital, computerized database of safety data sheets, and 59% use a digital, computerized system for OSHA injury and illness recordkeeping. Almost half (46%) employ eLearning for worker safety and health training. About four in ten (39%) use software to manage and analyze audits, investigations, training performance and reports of hazards and near misses. Analytics – software to collect safety and health data to predict accidents (who, where, when, how and why based on past history) is becoming increasing popular, now used by 25% of professionals. Almost the same number (23%) avail themselves of the ever-increasing number of safety apps for their mobile phones.

Safety and health internet discussion groups and networks are used by 47% of professionals, according to the survey, and 37% regularly use text messaging.

How ubiquitous is technology in safety today? Less than one in ten professionals (9%) say they dispense with any kind of electronic communication and only communicate verbally, either on the phone or in meetings or face-to-face conversations.

This reliance on virtual interactions is a potentially troubling trend. Safety work has always involved the human touch. Going out on the shop floor and making regular, if not daily “safety contacts” with individual employees is one of the oldest safety practices. A study of award-winning safety programs in mid-size Midwestern companies conducted by NIOSH in the 1970s found one of the hallmarks of these successful programs was safety supervisors knowing most every employee on a first-name basis, and regularly asking about their families.

The human, interpersonal side of safety is fundamental to the kind of relationships that are needed to build trust, confidence, and respect between safety professionals and the workforce. Circulating out on the floor, asking probing questions and actively listening to individual workers is essential to create a workforce that actively cares about safety, is engaged and empathetic, and feels recognized and rewarded for actions such as making safety suggestions, coming up with safety solutions, and reporting on safety hazards and problems.

No amount of texting or tweets, no barrage of emails, will motivate employees to engage in safety as much as the personal touch. Give them your time and attention. And show your appreciation through recognition and rewards, bestowed both on individuals and groups. There are numerous conveniences and cost-savings attached to virtual safety, but technology has its limits when it comes to engaging the hearts and minds of your workforce.